

THE LONDON READER

of Literature, Science, Art, and General Information.

No. 1858.—VOL. LXXII.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING DECEMBER 10, 1898.

[PRICE ONE PINT.

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AT THAT MOMENT A SERVANT APPEARED AND STRUCK DUNSTER A HEAVY BLOW WITH A CLUB.

THE MYSTERY OF HUBERT THELLUSON.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

It was the end of June, and the London season was at its height. Lights flashed from the windows, carriages filled with beautiful women in superb toilettes rolled up to the doors, and strains of music issued from within, rising and falling in delicious cadences on the balmy softness of the midsummer night.

In one of the most stately houses in Grosvenor Square a ball was being given, and it was unlike the general run of balls, in the fact of a Royal Prince and Princess being present, and making a brilliant scene yet more brilliant.

Amongst the guests was a young and extremely handsome man, whose face seemed somehow out of place in that haunt of pleasure, for it wore a

gloomy preoccupied expression, which showed that his thoughts were far away. He was leaning against a curtained doorway, his gaze wandering listlessly about amongst the dancers. Suddenly a gleam of interest came into his eyes, and turning to his companion—a man some ten years older than himself—he said—

" Gaston, who is that girl speaking to Lady Esmond at the end of the room ? "

The other put up his eyeglass before replying.

" Oh ! you mean the new beauty ! Her name is Marriot, and the man on whose arm she is leaning is her father. Pretty girl, isn't she ! "

" She is something more than that ! " was the emphatic reply ; and Lord Dunster, who was not given to general admiration, kept his eyes fixed upon the young girl until at last she, as if compelled by some magnetic attraction, lifted hers, and looked him straight in the face.

She was worthy of admiration—a tall, queenly girl, with a superb figure, and a face whose creamy pallor was lighted up by a carmine fire on either cheek. Her eyes were long, dark, and

lustrous, shaded by thick black lashes, while her finely-penciled brows, not arched, but beautifully level, gave an Egyptian cast to features that were in themselves rather of an Eastern type.

" I have never seen or heard of her before," went on Lord Dunster, as she turned away. " Is she an American ? "

" No, I think not. The fact is, no one exactly knows who or what she is, but she appeared in society about six weeks ago, and since then she has become the rage. Her photograph is in every window, milliners call their novelties after her name, and no party is complete without her presence. Her father must be an immensely rich man, for he lives in fine style, and spends his money like a prince. The Duke of Restford is hanging about after the girl, and, if rumour speaks the truth, it is not unlikely that he will lay his strawberry leaves at her feet."

" Do you know her personally ? " asked Lord Dunster.

" Certainly."

" Well enough to introduce me ? "

"Oh, yes!"

"Then do so, will you?"

"With pleasure," Captain Gaston replied, and forthwith led the young nobleman up to Miss Marriott, who was seated on a velvet lounge, talking to a group of men—or rather it would be more correct to say listening to them, for she spoke, and did not seem to take any particular interest in their conversation.

"Miss Marriott, will you permit me to present my friend, Lord Dunster!" said the officer, bowing low before her, and a few minutes later the young nobleman found himself alone with her, for a dance was just beginning, and the others took their departure in order to look for their respective partners.

"Are you engaged for this valve?" asked Dunster, as the music struck up.

"No."

"Then may I have the pleasure?"

"I think not," she returned, with a negligent smile. "I do not care for valuing, and would much prefer sitting out the dance if you do not mind."

"Certainly not, but you will let me take you to the conservatory, where it is so much cooler than it is here!"

She accepted his arm, and they quitted the ballroom, with its glittering chandeliers, and gorgeous floral decorations, for the cool, green shade of the adjoining conservatory. Tall palms were growing in big pots, and brilliant tropical plants blossomed out the frail sweetness of their lives, while a little marble fountain, plashing into its basin among the broad, green leaves of the water-lilies, made a gentle rippling sound, that mingled harmoniously with the strains of the music played by the band.

"You are different to most young ladies in not caring for dancing!" Lord Dunster observed, watching her as an artist might have watched a beautiful picture; and, indeed, she looked most lovely, leaning back amongst the green leaves, with the rich laces of her dress lying in billowy folds at her feet, and the sapphires and diamonds at her throat glittering with every movement of the graceful head.

"Yes, I suppose I am different to most young ladies, and that in that particular alone," she said, unfurling her fan of white ostrich feathers, and waving it gently to and fro. "Most girls like gaiety and going out in the world, but I do not."

"Really? You surprise me. I should have thought that at the present moment you were at the very summit of a woman's ambition."

A strange expression came on her face; he only caught it momentarily, but it looked like horror.

"I prefer a country life," she replied. "I think in these few weeks I have grown to hate the glare and glitter of crowded saloons, and the constant round of what is called pleasure. To me it seems forced and artificial. Do you think it strange I should say this to you, who are almost a stranger to me?" she demanded, quickly. "I have not grown sufficiently versed in the ways of the world to become conventional yet."

"And long may you be preserved from being so!" he exclaimed, fervently. "Still, this is your first season, and you are young enough to change."

"Yes, I suppose so. After all, I am not so very young—not so young as I look," she continued. "I am one-and-twenty, and that is a responsible age, is it not?"

He smiled, and she looked up at him with an answering smile. As she did so the light fell more fully on his face than it had yet done, and some familiarity seemed to strike her, for the colour all faded from her cheeks, and she made a half-shrinking backward movement.

"What is it?" he asked, rather alarmed at this sudden change of expression.

"Nothing! only your face reminded me of someone I once knew!" She stopped, her breath coming rather quickly; then, after a minute's pause, she added—

"Have you any brothers?"

His face darkened.

"I had one brother!"

"And his name was —?"

"Hubert Thelluson. Dunster is the name of the place from which I take my title!"

The young girl was looking straight before her, her cheeks still white, and her lips set together in a firm line, as if she were trying her utmost to keep calm.

She was a girl of wonderful nerve and self-control, and presently she turned to him, saying in her usual voice,

"Shall we go back to the ballroom again?

That valve must be nearly over now!"

"Oh, no! it is not. Of course I will take you back if you wish it. But I think it is so much pleasanter in here!"

"As you will!" she said. "By the way, how is it I have never seen you before?"

"Because I only returned to England to-day. My motive for coming here to-night was to see one of the ministers, who I knew would be present. I am certainly in no mood for dissipation myself, and if I had not had a weighty reason I should most assuredly not have become one of Lady Edmund's guests. However, independently of that, I am very glad I came!"

"Why?" He fixed his eyes meaningfully on her face.

"Need you ask? Because I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintances!"

She made a quick, impatient movement.

"Oh, if you only know how sick I am of all those stereotyped compliments!" she exclaimed, with a long sigh.

"I did not intend to pay you a compliment!" he said earnestly. "Believe me, I meant every word I said! There are some acquaintances that languish on for years without making any progress, and die a natural death at last. There are others that spring into friendship at one bound. I do not feel as if you were a stranger to me, although an hour ago I had never set eyes on your face!"

This was strange language from so complete a man of the world as Lord Dunster, and if anyone had prophesied it yesterday he would have laughed them to scorn. But he was under the influence of a spell too subtle for resistance; for this girl, with her Egyptian eyes, and proud, and mouth, had touched him as no woman had ever yet had power to do.

By a movement that was not without a suggestion of *hauteur* she recalled him to himself, and made him aware that he was saying more than he had any right to say.

"You are very good!" she observed, rising as she spoke, and drawing her cloak close over the polished marble of her bare shoulders, "but I certainly have no claim on your friendship, and in all probability we shall never meet again—at least, after the end of this season. Be kind enough to take me back to my father."

He bowed, and obeyed; and after she had dismissed him with a graceful word of farewell he stood where she left him, looking after her, and the tall, dark, swarthy man on whose arm she leaned.

"So that is her father!" he muttered to himself. "Well, I cannot say that I admire him, and what is more, I do not think he looks like a gentleman. Who is he, I wonder—where did he spring from?"—how does he get his money?"

To his surprise, he saw the girl and her father bidding their hostess farewell, and disappear from the room—which was strange, considering that the ball was not half over yet.

As it happened, the minister to whom Lord Dunster wanted to speak did not come after all, so the young man had to leave without achieving his object.

As he sauntered back to his chamber he found himself haunted by the face of the "new beauty," and every word she had spoken seemed to return with extra vividness to his memory. What did it mean? Was he falling in love?

"I believe my heart is caught at last!" he murmured, coming to a full stop under lamp-post. "I, who have always laughed at men when they have talked of 'love at first sight,' have fallen a victim to it myself. Well, she is fair enough to enthrall the coldest heart, and fire the iciest imagination; and if I am fated to be made a fool of I would rather it were for the sake of her lovely eyes than anything else."

After this it was quite natural that he should haunt every place where he thought it likely she was to be found. Every morning he rode in the Row, every afternoon drove in the Park, and spent the evenings going from reception to ball—all for the sake of meeting her.

Once or twice it struck him that she made a point of avoiding him, and certainly she put forth no effort to attract his attention at any time.

Lord Dunster had been rather spoiled, perhaps, and this course of conduct was new to him. He was a rich man, possessed of a fine mansion and estates in the Midlands, and looked upon as one of the greatest catches of the season. Mothers with daughters were always extremely attentive to him, and daughters always smiled and blushed with pleasure when he approached, so that he was quite unaccustomed to having his attentions treated so cavalierly.

Perhaps, if the truth must be told, this coldness on the part of Theckle Marriott only served to increase the interest he felt in her. It certainly did not prevent him from taking every opportunity that presented itself of frequenting her society; and people began to smile when he approached, and to call him her shadow.

"It's no good, Dunster, my boy," his friend Gaston said to him one day. "She is flying at higher game than you. Nothing less than the strawberry leaves will content her."

If this were indeed the case there seemed every probability of her ambition being gratified, for the Duke of Restford was one of the most constant of her admirers, and made no secret of his admiration.

All at once the "new beauty" and her father quitted town, and it was a noticeable fact that the fashionable papers, while chronicling their departure, omitted to say where they had gone.

The reason alleged for so abrupt a fitting was the delicacy of Miss Marriott's health, which required rest and change of air; but this was not altogether accepted as the truth by those who had seen her the night before she left, and who declared she had never looked more beautiful and blooming.

Lord Dunster, failing in his efforts discovering where she had gone from his friends, went in despair to the house rented by her father, with the intention of questioning the servants; but here he was foiled again, for the house was shut up, and a bill in the window announced that it was to let.

"Well," he said to himself, "I must try and forget her. Absence, as a rule, makes the heart grow colder instead of fonder, and perhaps it will do so in this case."

But it did nothing of the sort, for each day that passed only intensified the love which, like a plant of tropical growth, had sprung into blossom in one single night; and towards the end of July, the Viscount resolved to leave London, and spend a few weeks at Dunster Park, his place in W—shire.

It was a fine old house, grey with time-wrought beauties, and built on the slope of a hill, which was richly wooded, and at the foot of which the river Dun wound its silvery way.

The servants were, for the most part, old ones, who had been in the Dunster family for many years, and had grown grey in their service.

"We are very pleased to see you back, my lord," the old butler said, on the morning after the young nobleman's arrival, when he was seated at his solitary breakfast. "I hope your lordship intends to make a long stay?"

"Well, Browning, I really can't say," Lord Dunster answered; "but if I don't find the place too dull, I shall probably remain over September."

"It is dull," observed Browning, sympathetically. "It's a pity there are no gentlemen's seats near."

"I am not so sure of that," yawned the young man. "One may complain of its isolation, but that constitutes one of the charms of the place, nevertheless. By the way, I suppose the old Grange has not found a tenant yet?"

"Yes, my lord, it has! I was going to tell you about it. It caused quite a sensation when we heard that someone had taken it."

"I should think so! What is the tenant's name?"

"That I don't know, my lord, for I haven't seen him, but he hasn't attempted to put the place in repair yet, so I fancy there must be a screw loose somewhere," Browning added, with a knowing wink, a liberty his long service warranted him in taking. "It has struck me that he may be a bankrupt, run away from his creditors, and bent on keeping quiet for awhile."

"Very likely," responded Lord Dunster, who always encouraged the old man to talk, more especially when he was alone at the Park, and felt the loss of someone to speak to.

Perhaps it was owing to the conversation just given, that, when he sauntered out after breakfast, he should take the path across the fields, which led by a short cut to Norton Grange, or as it was more frequently and familiarly called, the "old Grange." The distance was about two miles and a half this way, but by the road it was almost double as far.

It was a very old house, built in the Elizabethan style, and nearly covered with ivy, which had even climbed up to the gables of the roof, and which may have served to increase the air of dampness and gloom that was its pervading characteristic. Round it was a deep moat filled with stagnant water, and beyond this lay the plantation, where the trees were growing in dank luxuriance free for many a long year from the touch of pruning knife or trainer.

Lord Dunster knew his way through this plantation, and it was here his curiosity led him on this particular morning, when he braved the peril of being called to account for trespassing.

Never since he was a boy had the place had an occupant, save, indeed, the owl that built in the chimney, and the rats that scurried through the cellars; and he remembered well the stories he used to hear concerning it—how a man had brought his young wife there, had grown jealous of her, and one day, in an access of passion at her supposed infidelity, had first of all shot her, and then fallen dead at her feet, with a bullet through his own brain.

It was an awful tragedy, and no one was brave enough to take the house after it had been enacted; so for many years it had stood empty, growing daily more desolate, until even the herons took flight from the pool, and the country people believed devoutly that it was haunted by the ghost of the poor young wife who had fallen a victim to her husband's cruel and unfounded suspicions.

No wonder, therefore, that when it was let the news was received with surprise.

"By Jove, it is a dreary hole!" muttered Lord Dunster, as he viewed it from behind a clump of trees; and involuntarily he thought of Hood's lines:—

"O'er all there hung a silence and a fear,
A sense of mystery the spirit daunted,
And said as plain as whisper in the ear,
The house is haunted!"

At that moment there came a loud barking, and a dog sprang from behind some bushes in rather closer proximity to the young man's calves than he was inclined to think desirable, especially as the animal had evidently some bulldog blood in him, and showed a ferocious muzzle as he stood, snarling and barking at the intruder.

"Be quiet, Joe—lie down;" cried a fresh young voice, at the sound of which Dunster felt the blood suddenly rush to his heart, and a minute later there stood before him no less a person than Theekla Marriott herself.

Her surprise was equal to his own, but she was the first to recover her self-possession, and advanced, holding out her hand.

"How do you do, Lord Dunster! This is an unlooked-for meeting!"

"And—to me—a very great pleasure," he responded, bowing low over the slim white hand. "Are you staying in this neighbourhood, may I ask?"

"I am staying there," pointing with her fingers to the ivy-shrouded house across the moat.

"At the haunted Grange? Impossible!"

"It is true, nevertheless. My father has taken the place for twelve months."

Lord Dunster stared at her in speechless astonishment.

"You seem very much surprised!" she observed, looking at him curiously.

"I am more than surprised," he answered, with candour. "I am dumbfounded."

"I do not know why you should be," she said, colouring. "There is surely nothing so very strange in our wishing to get away as far into the country as we can."

"Certainly not; but I should have thought this uncanny house would have been the last to strike your fancy. However, perhaps you are ignorant of the reputation it has acquired?"

"You mean as to its being haunted?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" she said, indifferently, "we are proof against ghosts—luckily for ourselves; and indeed, we are inclined to think the legend rather an advantage than otherwise, seeing that it keeps people away."

"Am I to take that as an intimation that I must not call on Mr. Marriott?"

"Yes," she replied, with grave directness. "We left London because we wished to get away from the noise and tumult of the world, and while we are here we desire the most perfect quiet. Besides, our retinue of servants is so small that it would be impossible for us to entertain."

He bowed without replying, and after a little more conversation she bade him farewell, and, calling her dog, crossed the moat, and disappeared behind the house.

CHAPTER II.

THE more Lord Dunster pondered over the strangeness of Mr. Marriott and his daughter occupying such a dilapidated old place as the haunted Grange the more incomprehensible did it appear. Of course, after what Theekla had said, it would be impossible for him to call there, and yet he by no means intended giving up her acquaintance, for the sight of her beauty had given a fresh impetus to his love, and he resolved, come what might, that he would do his best to win her.

Her father might be an undesirable person, perhaps, but he felt a conviction that she, at least, was pure and good, and worthy to become any man's wife.

As she would not visit anywhere there seemed no prospect of meeting her casually, but she must go for walks occasionally, and so he resolved to watch for her in the plantation, and take the risk of her anger.

For three days he was unsuccessful, and he spent the whole of the morning sitting on the fallen trunk of a tree without any result. Then he resolved to try the afternoon; and at last his ruse was crowned with success, for Theekla and her dog appeared, crossing the moat, and presently entered the shrubbery.

Dunster did not go to meet her, for he had no desire for their meeting to be witnessed from the house, and if she came to the spot where he was waiting there would be no danger of such a catastrophe.

"You here again!" she exclaimed, stopping short and colouring—he did not know whether it was with anger or confusion.

"Yes, it is I. I hope you are not going to be angry with me for my audacity!"

"Why—oh, why did you come?" she murmured in distress, clasping her hands together.

"Shall I tell you the truth?" he asked, lowering his voice, and taking her hand—keeping it, too, in spite of all her efforts to withdraw it. "I came because I was resolved to see you again. I am not the sort of man to give up an object when I have once resolved upon it, and from the first night I saw you I determined to win you as my wife. I love you, Theekla—love you so dearly, that life without you would be a long misery! Darling! what have you to say to me?"

She said nothing, but just for one moment it seemed to him that she swayed towards him, and

her eyes confessed what her tongue would not utter.

The weakness was only momentary, however, for the next instant she drew herself away.

"I cannot listen to such an avowal—you must never speak to me so again!" she exclaimed, in an agitated voice.

"But you have not answered my question, Theekla!"

"I will do so, then, and the answer is a negative. Now, will you leave me?"

"No!" he said, boldly. "Perhaps I have been too hasty in my declarations, but I do not despair, and I refuse to be sent away. If I cannot be your lover I will be your friend. Surely you will not deny me that!"

She did not seem to know how to answer him, and looked round with a pathetic sort of bewilderment, as if she would fain seek for counsel.

She did not say "No!" however; and he, seeing his advantage, at once pursued it.

"All I ask is that you will let me meet you occasionally, and if ever you want anything that you will come to me. Trust me, Theekla, I will be a sincere friend to you."

"I accept your offer!" she said, speaking as if on the impulse of a sudden resolution. "Heaven knows I want a friend badly enough. But you will not attempt to visit the house!"

"No!—that is, if I may reckon on seeing you here sometimes!"

"I come out every afternoon when it is fine I returned. And so the compact was made, and each afternoon they saw each other, and walked together through the leafy woods that stretched between the plantation and Dunster Park.

Several times he asked her to come over and look through the picture-gallery at the house, but this she declined.

The fact was, she seemed to have an almost morbid dread of seeing anyone, and often the young Viscount thought how changed she was from the brilliant belle of a few weeks ago!

As he got to know her better he was more than ever struck with the vein of deep sadness that seemed to run through her life, and which yet appeared to be unnatural to her disposition.

Of all things save those which concerned herself she was ready to take a cheerful view, but the contemplation of her own destiny invariably filled her with melancholy.

Thus two or three weeks passed away, and the fact of their meetings remained unknown to anyone but themselves. No word of love had been spoken between them, but Dunster could see that she was growing to depend upon him more and more, and the glad blushes leapt to her cheek every time she saw him.

As for him, that one hour in the day ceased to content him, and often he would stroll over to the plantation after dinner, trusting to the darkness to conceal him, and satisfied if he caught a glimpse of a shadow on the blind of the window which he knew to be hers.

One night he was there rather later than usual. In point of fact, it was after midnight, but he had felt restless and fidgety that evening, and knew it would be impossible to sleep, even if he went to bed.

He had no hope of seeing the shadow on the blind, as probably Theekla would have retired to rest; but for all that, it would be a satisfaction for him to watch the casket in which his beautiful treasure was enshrined.

All was very quiet round the old Grange—not a light twinkled from the windows, and not even an ivy leaf moved.

There was no moon, and the faint light of the stars was only just sufficient to show the outline of objects on which it fell.

Suddenly the figure of a man issued from a side door, and with noiseless footsteps proceeded to reconnoitre. He went all round the house, pausing now and again to look about, as if to make sure there were no intruders near; then he came back to the bridge, and let loose a dog, who crossed it, and dashed immediately into the plantation.

Just for a minute Dunster felt a little quaking.

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but as the animal approached he said, in low tones—

"Joe—Joe!"

The dog, which was the same Theekla frequently brought with her, had by this time got to know the young man, and therefore took no notice of his presence, but went scurrying through the plantation, and at length returned over the bridge to the man who had despatched him, and who had been standing motionless all this time, apparently waiting for the result of the animal's search.

Evidently the letter had been sent for the purpose of skirmishing, and making sure there was no one about.

After the animal had recrossed the bridge the man went indoors, and a few minutes elapsed without anything occurring; then the door again opened, and three men issued forth, carrying a long, dark object, which seemed to be of considerable weight, for they stopped two or three times to put it down and rest, even in the short distance from the house to the moat.

Dunster, as much interested as mystified, watched these proceedings from his vantage point in the plantation, himself well screened from view by the bushes, behind which he was standing.

Arrived at the moat, the men put their burden down, and proceeded to adjust some ropes round it; after which, they—not without a good deal of difficulty—lowered it into the water, and then, as quietly as they had come out, returned to the house.

Lord Dunster waited for an hour or two longer, but saw nothing more, and then went home, very much puzzled by what he had witnessed.

What could be the contents of that long, heavy box, that they had evidently been so anxious to get rid of? Was Mr. Marriott one of the two who had helped to carry it? The young man fancied he had recognised him, but he was too far away, and the light was too dim for him to feel any certainty on the subject. Still the episode made him uncomfortable, and increased the mistrust he had for some time entertained towards Theekla's father.

Should he tell the girl what he had seen? No; he decided that to do so would only render her uncomfortable without doing any good. Besides, the affair might be capable of a perfectly natural and common-place solution, mysterious as it seemed when viewed from the outside.

The next morning he received a letter which caused him a good deal of anxiety, and when Theekla met him in the afternoon, she said, quickly,

"What is the matter? You look quite pale and woe-begone."

"Do I? I had very little sleep during the night; and, besides, I am worried."

She looked up at him with quick inquiry, but instead of answering the question her eyes asked, he said, abruptly,—

"Did you sleep well last night?"

"Very well indeed."

"And were not disturbed by anything?"

"No."

"What time did you go to bed?"

"At my usual hour—eleven. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," he answered with a nervous laugh. "Perhaps I thought that, as I did not sleep myself, there might have been something in the air inhibiting to slumber."

"As a matter of fact, I slept much sounder than usual," she avowed, "for I drank a glass of wine before I went upstairs, and that is a thing I very rarely do."

"What made you do so last night?"

"Well, my father had just had a bottle of champagne opened, and he insisted on my tasting it."

"But I thought you told me a few days ago that your father was from home, and that you did not expect him back for a week?"

"That is true. He came back, however, last night, quite unexpectedly."

"And is at home now?"

"Yes."

Dunster was silent for a few minutes.

"Theekla!" he said, at length—he had gradually dropped into the habit of calling her by her Christian name. "Do you not think that your hurried departure from town, and burying yourself alive in this most dreary place, was calculated to arouse suspicions in the minds of your friends?"

"I have no friends," she returned, a little drearily.

"Of your acquaintances, then?"

She looked at him with startled, widely-opened eyes.

"What kind of suspicions do you mean?"

"I mean with regard to your father—I cannot mention anything specific—but people must have thought things were not quite as they ought to be; that perhaps he was in debt, or something of that sort. I know you will not mind my saying this, for you must be sure that I care for you too well to wish to wound you."

"No doubt what you say is quite right," she said, slowly. "But the real reason why we left in such haste was that the Duke of Restford had made me an offer of marriage which I declared my intention of refusing. My father, however, was so angry, that he wrote to the duke himself, saying that I must take time to deliberate over my answer, or something to that effect, and then he brought me away lest I should see the Duke and tell him the truth."

"Then you were not tempted by the prospect of becoming a duchess?"

She turned upon him a look of such proud reproach that he felt ashamed of the question.

"Forgive me, Theekla! I ought to have known better than ask you. Now I will tell you the reason why I look so miserable—I shall have to go away."

"Go away!" she echoed, while all the sweet carmine faded from her cheeks. Then she turned away her eyes, so that he should not see their expression, and added, "When must you go?"

"To-morrow morning, by the first train. I will explain to you the reason why. I have often been on the point of telling you the story. You remember asking me if I had a brother?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is on account of him that my departure is necessary. His name is Hubert Thelluson, and he is a couple of years younger than I am. Some six months ago he went abroad, and at first I heard from him pretty regularly; then his letters suddenly ceased, and although I wrote and told him I was growing anxious about him I could not obtain any reply. At that time I was in India but I came home to Europe for the purpose of trying to see him, and amongst other places went to Vienna, where he had been when he had last wrote to me. I inquired at his hotel, but discovered nothing beyond the fact that he went out one day, did not return, and the next morning sent someone to pay his bill, and fetch away his luggage. Since then all traces of him seem to be lost, and although I have employed detectives, and I think they have done their utmost, the mystery still remains unsolved."

"The very night I came to England from Vienna I went to Lady Esmond's ball in order to see the Austrian Ambassador, whom I expected would be there. Since then I have only prosecuted my inquiries through agents and detectives, as they all advised me not to interfere personally in the matter. One of the men, however, who has been in Vienna, wrote to me this morning, saying he should be in London to-morrow, and asking me to meet him there, so I am in hopes that he may have news for me."

Theekla had listened to the story very quietly, and with apparent attention, nay, more than attention, for her face had grown white to the lips, and she sat down on the prone trunk of the tree that was their rendezvous, and did not raise her eyes even when he finished speaking.

"What do you think has happened to your brother?" she said at last, in very low tones.

"I do not know what to think," the Viscount responded, gloomily. "Sometimes I fear that he has been robbed and murdered, sometimes that he has become mixed up with some political quarrel, and dare not show himself until it has blown over, for his political principles have

always been a source of anxiety to me, and I have many times feared they would drag him into some scrape or another. He was a Socialist—a democrat, I may say."

"Some accident may have happened to him," faltered Theekla.

"I do not think so, for if that had been the case his luggage would not have been sent for to the hotel. No, I have hoped against hope all this long time, but now I am beginning to fear the worst."

He was very depressed, and not even her presence had power to cheer him. As a matter of fact, Theekla herself seemed exceedingly dispirited, and in a few minutes rose to go. As she was saying good-bye he kept hold of her hand.

"I shall see you here on my return from town!" he said interrogatively.

"Oh, yes, I think so. When shall you be back?"

"The day after to-morrow, probably."

"Then I will be here in the afternoon," she said, withdrawing her hand, and hurrying away in a sort of feverish haste that struck him as strange.

That same night he was in town, and the next morning, as he was sitting in his rooms in Piccadilly, the person he was expecting was announced.

"Mr. Pilchard, please, my lord!" the servant said, as she opened the door; and there walked in a short, slim, dapper little man, clean shaven, and with that class of physiognomy one has come to associate with actors.

"Good morning, my lord. I hope I see you well!" he observed, with a low bow before he seated himself. "Your lordship received my letter, I presume?"

"Yes, and as you see, obeyed its summons. I am all anxiety to hear what you have to tell me with regard to my brother."

"Very good. We will proceed to business at once."

The detective drew his chair close to the table, and took from his pocket a memorandum book which he opened and consulted.

"The last letter you received from your brother was on January the twenty-fourth."

"It was."

"And you have heard nothing of him since?"

"No—or at least nothing but what I have learned from you regarding his departure from the hotel. I have been hoping, however, that you would be able to furnish me with information."

"I have not been idle, my lord," was the quick retort, "but Vienna is a large city, and the clue to guide me is mere nothing. However, I have succeeded in discovering something, and I hope it may lead to more. I found from a waiter at the hotel that your brother was in the habit of going out every evening at the same time, and in the same direction, usually returning after midnight. On these occasions he did not wear dress clothes, so it is clear he was not at fashionable assemblies, or associating with people in his own rank of life. The hypothesis that remains is either that he was at a gambling hell, or at the meeting of some secret society."

"Hubert was not a gambler," put in Lord Dunster, hastily.

"But he mixed himself up in politics?"

"Yes. Still he was not a Nihilist either. He wanted reforms, but he was not the sort of man to do evil that good might come."

"We are often led into evil without knowing it," observed Pilchard, sententiously. "Now, in the midst of my peregrinations I discovered a house that had been somewhat of a puzzle to the people living near. It was situated in a very quiet neighbourhood, and no one was ever seen issuing from it in the day time, but at night many visitors came and went, and yet there was never any noise. These visitors, for the most part, wore costumes that were rather suggestive of a desire for secrecy; that is to say, they often had on soft felt hats which were pulled over their faces so as to disguise their features, and large cloaks or overcoats that performed the same office for their figures."

"From whom did you learn this?" asked the Viscount.

"From the daughter of a shopkeeper near, where curiosity had been aroused, and who kept a watch on the place."

"But what had this to do with my brother?"

"I am coming to that part of the history. It seems that, one evening, this girl saw a young man going along, whom she had often seen before, and from whose dress there fell a gold button or stud. She picked it up, and went after him, but he had disappeared within the house, and although she rang and knocked loudly for some time she could not get an answer. This was late in January, and she never saw this young man again. I bought the stud from her on the chance of your recognising it, and here it is."

He took it from his pocket-book, carefully unwrapped the silver paper in which it was folded, and handed it to the young man.

It was plain gold, engraved in tiny discs, rather a peculiar pattern, and Dunster started violently as he saw it.

"Can you identify it?" asked the detective, who was watching him closely.

"Yes, it is poor Hubert's, or, at least, he had some like it, for he designed the pattern himself."

"Then," said Pilchard, with a certain amount of satisfaction. "I think we have proved that its owner must have been your brother!"

"But about the house!" exclaimed Dunster, impatiently. "Did you not make inquiries, then?"

"I did more, for I obtained permission to search it. The result, however, was not encouraging, for it was empty, save of some dingy and much dilapidated furniture. I then applied to the landlord, who said he had let it for six months, furnished, to a man who paid him the rent in advance, but of this man he knew nothing save that he was an American, and his name was Pallen."

"Then," said the Viscount, steadying his voice by an effort, "what is your opinion on the subject? Do you think my brother was murdered?"

"That I cannot say, but certainly that house had something to do with his disappearance. I was going to tell you it had very extensive cellars underneath, and in them a trap-door, at the bottom of which was a pit or well."

"Good heavens!" cried Dunster, with a horror that was purely involuntary. Then after a moment's pause, he added, in an agitated voice, "These people could not have disappeared without a conveyance, without horses! Did you not inquire at the livery stables if they had not hired an equipage?"

Pilchard smiled with a slight contempt.

"Certainly I did, my lord, but if this Pallen wanted to conceal his identity he would have a dozen ways of doing it. For example, the party would divide, or would be disguised."

"But if they were taking my brother away against his will, why did he not call for assistance while travelling?"

"Why indeed?" said the detective, gravely. "That is one of the reasons that makes me fear he never left Vienna; and now I have put the case before you, I want to know whether you think it worth while for me to go on with the inquiries."

"By all means continue!" exclaimed the Viscount, hastily. "If the poor fellow really has met with foul play nothing shall induce me to rest until his murderer has been brought to justice. Make every inquiry you can, and apply to me when you want money. In the meantime, let me provide you with some for your present necessities."

He wrote a cheque for a hundred pounds, and after taking it Pilchard wished him good morning and took leave, while Dunster paced the room in a state of uncontrollable agitation.

He had been very fond of his brother, and the thought that he had met his death by foul play—while it stirred him with horror—roused in his soul a keen desire for vengeance, and he determined to consecrate his life to the task of finding out the truth; and then, if his suspicions were verified, meting out a terrible punishment.

CHAPTER III.

AFTER a good deal of thought Dunster determined to go to Vienna himself, but first of all he must return to the country, and arrange matters with a view to his absence. Then he wanted to see Theekla, tell her all Pilchard had related, and wish her good-bye before starting.

Accordingly, the next afternoon he was at the old place, but when the appointed time came it did not bring Theekla with it; and as three hours passed away, and she had not yet appeared, he began to fear something must have happened.

He did not go away, however; for so long as it was light there was still a chance of her coming, and it was better waiting for her there, and having in view the roof that sheltered her, than waiting at home in the loneliness of his own grand house.

It was not a pleasant afternoon, a thunderous closeness filled the air, and the clouds hung low, and were heavy and leaden. There was a storm brooding, and it threatened to be very violent when it broke.

Seven o'clock came, and just as Dunster was getting up in order to go away, a light footstep crushed the fallen leaves, and Theekla stood before him, so pale and heavy-eyed that the flattening idea that she had been lamenting his absence at once flashed across him, and made him infuse more warmth than usual into his manner as he took her hand.

"Oh!" she said, with a long drawn sigh of relief, "I feared you would have grown tired of waiting!"

"I should never be tired of waiting if the prospect of seeing you at last remained to me," he answered, tenderly.

She did not seem to notice the compliment, or if she did she did not rebuke it.

"When did you come from London?" she asked, in a quick nervous manner.

"This morning."

"And—and have you discovered anything?"

He gave her details of the conversation that had taken place between himself and the detective, and apparently the recital caused her great agitation, for she was trembling violently as he concluded.

"You are too sensitive to listen to such stories," he said, with affectionate anxiety. "I ought not to have told you this."

"But I wanted to know. I wanted to know everything," was her quick response, and then for some time she remained silent, her eyes fixed on the ground.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked at length.

"Devote myself to the task of solving the mystery," he returned promptly. "People who disappear in this nineteenth century of ours ought to be traced without much difficulty, and I will never rest until my efforts are rewarded with success."

"You will go abroad, I suppose?"

"Yes, to Vienna, which means that I must say good-bye to you. I hope it will not be for long."

"It will be for ever," she said, with a strange calmness of conviction. "I shall never see you again."

"If I thought that, I should be tempted not to go."

"And neglect your duty?"

"Your rebuke is right. No, nothing should induce me to do that. I wonder," he continued, looking at her fixedly; "whether this farewell means half as much to you as it does to me."

She rose his gaze fixedly, but drew a sharp breath, as if she were suffering.

"Yes," she said slowly. "You shall hear the truth now that you are leaving. It does pain me to think that I shall never see you more—pains me more than I can say."

He took her hands in his, and drew her close to him.

"Then, Theekla, you love me?"

"I love you," she repeated after him. Their lips met in a close, clinging kiss, but a moment after she had withdrawn herself from his embrace, and stood a little distance away.

"You tell me you love me!" she said, in a

nervous, hurried voice, "and I believe you, but all the same I should like to test the truth of your words."

"Test it in any way you will; I am sure you will not find me wanting."

"Will you then, grant the request I am about making?"

"You must let me hear what it is, first."

"You will not promise without hearing!"

"Hardly," he said, with a smile. "You might ask me for the moon, you see, and then where would my promise be!"

She made a quick movement of impatience.

"I am not likely to jest with you at such a moment as this. Your faith in me cannot be quite perfect, or you would trust me more. However, I want you to," she spoke very slowly, so that each word might tell. "I want you to give up this search after your brother."

"What!" he exclaimed in the utmost surprise.

She repeated her request in the same deliberate manner.

"My dearest Theekla, you cannot be aware of what you are saying! Why, you yourself reminded me a minute ago that it was my duty to continue it."

"I know I did, but then I had not confessed my love, and therefore had no claim on you. Now—a lovely blush spread itself over her cheeks—"it is different."

"But what reason have you for making such a demand?"

"Simply this; that you are liable to fall into danger, for you may be sure that the people at whose hands your brother came to harm will not be likely to spare you."

He drew her to him, in spite of her resistance, and kissed her over and over again.

"I am more than grateful for your thinking so much of my safety," he said, tenderly, "but, all the same, I cannot accede to your wishes."

"Why not?" sharply.

For answer he repeated the lines—

"I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more."

"Then," she said, her face growing very pale, and the strained look she had seen before coming again into her eyes, "you put upon me the humiliation of a refusal after I have lowered my pride in asking you a favour."

"Theekla!" he exclaimed, his brows contracting, "surely you are not one of those unreasonable women who are angry if they cannot have everything they want, and utterly refuse to be convinced by argument! If I were to agree to your demand, I tell you you would despise me as much as I should despise myself. Ask me anything else, tell me to risk my life in getting you a flower even, and you shall not find me backward, but do not try to turn me from what you, as well as I, know to be my duty."

Her eyelids drooped, and for a few moments a sculptor might have taken her as a model for despondency. Then she raised her head and looked at him steadily. Apparently the result of her scrutiny was discouraging, for she sighed deeply.

"At least," she said, "you will do this much. Consent not to begin your inquiries for another week? Surely that is little enough to ask!"

"Perhaps so, and I agree to it, while at the same time I confess I ought not to do so," he replied, frankly. "In return for this concession you must let me see you longer each day that I am here."

She did not seem to hear the last part of his sentence, but made a quick gesture of farewell, and without another word or look ran across the drawbridge and into the house, leaving Dunster amazed at the suddenness of her disappearance.

He waited some time, thinking perhaps she might return, but she did not; and presently, the storm that had been threatening for so long, burst, and Dunster drew farther back into the plantation in order to obtain shelter.

A few minutes later he heard the sound of quick footsteps over the dead leaves, and on looking up beheld no less a person than Mr. Marriott standing before him.

"This is a surprise!" said the latter, holding

out his hand. "I did not know you had left town, although I was aware you had a seat near here!"

Dunster was conscious of a strong sense of repugnance to this man, with his olive skin and cold, dark eyes—a repugnance so strong that he had some difficulty in concealing it sufficiently to make his greeting conventional.

"I left London this morning," he said, "and I return again to-morrow. By the way, may I beg your hospitality until the storm clears? I am getting wet through."

"Certainly," returned Marriott; but his words came after a perceptible pause. "I am afraid," he added, with a grim laugh, "you will not think much of the shelter I am enabled to afford, for my roof is hardly water-proof—a picturesque fact when viewed from the outside, but uncom-fortable for those within."

He led the way across the bridge, but when he came to the door, instead of entering as Theekla had done, he pulled the rusty handle of the hanging bell, which resulted in a peal that was sent back in hollow echoes from within.

It was some time before it was answered, and then a man of middle-age, dressed quietly in black, let them in, looking with some slight surprise at the Viscount, as if a visitor were a sort of rare avis.

Marriott led the way into a long, lofty room, of which the furniture was old and moth-eaten, but which, thanks to a fire blazing in the grate, presented a much less uncomfortable appearance than might have been expected. It is true some attempts to hide the dilapidated state of the room had been made—a tiger-skin was thrown over the couch, some Eastern rugs concealed the shabbiness of the carpet, and an easy chair of modern manufacture had been imported, and was drawn close up to the fireplace.

"Rather early for a fire, isn't it?" said Marriott, offering his guest the armchair. "But this house is damp, and even in summer does not labour under the disadvantage of being too hot!"

"I should think not!" exclaimed the young man. "I must confess I was very much astonished when I heard you had taken such a God-forsaken place!"

Marriott flashed upon him a sharp glance of suspicious inquiry.

"Who told you I had taken it?" he asked, quickly.

"I saw you go in once from the plantation!" Dunster replied, with some slight embarrassment, for he was unaware whether Mr. Marriott knew anything of his meetings with his daughter, and did not, therefore, care to give Theekla as his informant.

He looked about to see if he could discover any sign of her presence in the room, but there were none—no flowers, no books, no work-basket, or music.

"Is this where you generally sit?" he asked his host.

"Yes!"

Then it was clear that Theekla did not often favour her father with her company!

Mr. Marriott, apologising to his guest for his absence, left the room for a few minutes, and when he returned sat down on the opposite side of the fire, and began to talk on indifferent topics until the same domestic who had let them in appeared with a tablecloth. He proceeded to set on the table a plentiful—nay, epicurean repast, and brought up some bottles of choice wines.

"I must really apologise for intruding upon you thus unceremoniously!" said Dunster; who, however, was keenly enough interested in the household to feel under great obligations to the storm—which still raged with unabated fury—for giving him this chance of studying it.

He did full justice to the meal, and after it was finished, and he and Marriott were lingering over their cigars, it happened that the conversation turned on tiger-hunting, and Dunster got up in order to examine the rug before alluded to.

"This is a fine skin!" he observed, regarding it with admiration. "I suppose you did not shoot the animal yourself?"

"No; but a friend of mine did, and gave me the skin!" returned Marriott. "Come! let me give you another glass of Madeira!" he added, suiting the action to the word. "I can strongly recommend this wine!"

Dunster did not respond to this invitation; he was looking at the skin with great attention—examining it inside and out.

"Do you know," he said presently, with a pained air, "I could almost swear I had seen this rug before—nay, that I shot the very animal from which it was taken myself! It is strange!"

"More than strange—absurd!" gruffly responded his host. "It is not likely that I should have in my possession the skin of a tiger which you shot!"

"And yet it is true." Dunster came over with the rug in his hand. "See—here is the slit made by my knife in his throat, and if I were to turn up my coat-sleeve I could show you the marks he made on my arm. That was a struggle I am not likely to forget, for I was within a ace of getting killed myself. I shot the animal—as I believed—dead, but on coming close to him I found my mistake—and it was a good thing for me I happened to have my knife in my hand. You see the skin is a particularly large one, and has some peculiar marks upon it, so that I have no difficulty in identifying it, more especially as in this corner are my punctured initials!"

It was quite true. Invisible, except to the closest examination, the initial "E. D." (Ernest Dunster) were yet distinctly to be seen.

Marriott seemed somewhat taken aback by the discovery, and his brow grew gloomy.

"If the rug is yours, pray take it," he said at length. "I cannot conceive, though, how it got into my friend's possession, supposing your suspicions to be correct."

"Do you mind telling me the name of your friend?"

"Certainly I do!" retorted Marriott, angrily. "I will not allow myself to be questioned and cross-questioned by anybody."

"I beg your pardon—I had not the slightest intention of cross-questioning you. I suppose," he added courteously, as he put the rug back in its former position, "I must have been mistaken. I gave the skin of which I speak to my brother Hubert, and it is extremely unlikely that he would have parted with it."

"And who may your brother Hubert be?" asked Marriott, unconcernedly.

Dunster, in replying, told him of Hubert's strange disappearance, and his own efforts to solve the mystery surrounding it.

Marriott listened attentively, and shrugged his shoulders as the young man ceased speaking.

"Better leave the matter where it is," he observed, significantly. "It's no use stirring dirty water, you know. I dare say your brother got mixed up with bad company, or something of that kind. Hundreds of people disappear annually in Europe, and no clue is ever discovered to their whereabouts."

"Other people don't concern me, but my brother's case is not a parallel one," responded the Viscount. "For I shall never be satisfied until I have brought his murderer to justice!"

Marriott was a moderate drinker himself, but he did his best to make his guest empty the bottle, and it required all Dunster's firmness to prevent himself from being forced into imbibing more than was good for him.

In order to resist his host's persuasions he got up and went to the window, lifting up the blind so as to be able to look out into the night.

"It still rains heavily," he said, at the result of his observation.

Mr. Marriott made no remark, and after a slight pause, Dunster added—

"Would you think me presuming on your kindness if I asked you for a bed? It is so dark that I really fear I shouldn't be able to find my way back to-night."

"My dear fellow, you would be most welcome to a bed, but it so happens that we have not a spare one in the house. We only furnished the rooms we know we should occupy."

"Och!" rejoined Dunster, with a slight laugh. "I should have couched my request in different

words, for by a 'bed' I simply mean a stool or. I can rest most comfortably on that couch, for example."

"Then do so, by all means. I'm afraid, however, you won't find it very comfortable, in spite of your stoicism."

It was not a particularly cordial invitation, but Dunster cared little for that. He was anxious to stay at the Grange as long as he could, for although not probable, it was nevertheless just possible that he might see or hear something which would throw light on his master's motives for coming there.

After some more conversation, Marriott again excused himself, and during his absence a servant brought in a tray on which were lemons, sugar, and a spirit-stand. Hardly had he departed before a white hand was thrust through the open door, and a tiny note fell at Dunster's feet.

Opening it, he found it contained but a couple of lines, in handwriting that he believed to be Theekla's.

"Do not drink anything more to-night, but if you are pressed have the glass filled, and say you will finish it just before going to sleep."

He had only just time to master the sense of these lines when his host returned, and proceeded to brew some punch, which he told Dunster he would find particularly good.

The latter could not with politeness refuse to taste it, but having done so, he said, with an appearance of candour—

"The fact is, I have drunk so much Madeira that I don't care to mix the two just yet. Will you let me keep the punch until just before I lie down?"

Marriott, of course, assented, and before long bade Dunster good-night, having first provided him with a couple of cushions and an extra rug.

As soon as he had left the room the young man emptied the contents of the glass into a large china bowl, and then threw himself on the couch, and began to think over the events of the evening.

He was quite convinced that this tiger-skin was the identical one he had given to his brother, and then the question arose—How did it come into Marriott's possession?

He said a friend had given it him; but his manner did not tend to convince Dunster of his veracity, and his refusal to mention the name of the friend was suspicious, to say the least.

Dunster had no doubt whatever that the punch was drugged, and that Theekla, for this reason, had desired to prevent his drinking it. But what motive could Marriott have for desiring to make him sleep?

CHAPTER IV.

It need hardly be said that Dunster did his best to keep awake, and lay for a couple of hours quite still, and listening with ears keenly on the alert for any abnormal sound that might break the silence.

All was very quiet—even the rain had ceased, and the only interruption to the night silence was the weird shriek of an owl now and again, as he flew through the darkness in search of prey.

It must be remembered that Dunster had journeyed from London that day, and had been for two or three nights without his proper amount of sleep, so that it is hardly surprising that he should have been unable to keep another vigil, and should allow himself to be overcome by fatigue, and drop into an uneasy slumber, soon after the striking of the clock warned him that it was two hours past midnight.

He awoke suddenly with the impression that a ray of light had just fallen across his face. As he opened his eyes, however, he found the room was in total darkness; but with an instinct of caution, that proved well founded, he did not stir.

A minute later and a slide was pushed aside from a dark lantern, thus proving that someone was in the apartment besides himself.

Who it was he did not see just then, for

thinking he had better feign sleep, he again closed his eyes.

The holder of the lantern drew near, bent over him, and, apparently assured that he was asleep, put down the lantern, and gently took the memorandum-book and other contents out of his pocket; then drawing a chair up to the table, looked hastily through them, after which he quietly restored them to their owner and left the room.

No sooner had he gone—of course the nocturnal intruder was none other than Marriott—than the Viscount sprang up, and with noiseless footsteps followed him along the corridor, keeping, however, at a pretty respectful distance, so that his presence should not be suspected.

At the end of the passage Marriott paused, and tapped gently at a door, which was immediately opened by the servant who had acted as butler.

"Is he all right?" asked the butler.

"Yes! and, as far as I can make out, suspects nothing!" returned Marriott. "We can send the things away after all!"

They both went down some stone steps, and then it became evident that the basement part of the old Grange was pretty extensive; for a long stone corridor gave access to a couple of large, though low rooms, in which three men were hard at work packing various boxes. The silence and clarity with which they did it were something marvellous; and Dunster, who had paused at the door, and was now peering in between the cracks, wondered greatly what the contents of the small, but seemingly heavy packages could be.

Marriott himself helped in the packing, and, strange to say, hardly a word was spoken—indeed, they all seemed too busy for the exchange of commonplaces.

"I suppose," observed one of the men, at last, addressing Marriott, "we may be sure the coast is clear?"

"Oh, yes—quite sure. My visitor is firmly asleep, thanks to the opiate I mixed with his whisky, and there is no one else likely to be on the watch."

A little later, the speaker desisted from his employment, and saying something in a voice too low for Dunster to overhear, came towards the door, upon which the latter swiftly retreated upstairs again, and returned to his couch.

He was far from being a coward, but he saw clearly enough that if Marriott suspected him of spying he would stand no chance, unarmed as he was, against four strong men, who were doubtless well provided with weapons.

The mystery was thickening, and the Viscount's heart fell, as he reflected on the share that the woman he loved might have in it.

It was not a pleasant position—sitting there in the dark, waiting for he knew not what, and tormented the while by a hundred suspicions too dim and vague to put into words. At last the strain grew too great to be borne, and he got up and went to the window.

It was not very light, although by this time the moon had risen; nevertheless, the outlines of a carriage and pair of horses were dimly visible standing in front of the house, and even as he looked the door opened, and Marriott came forth, half carrying, half dragging a figure wrapped from head to foot in a long black cloak.

Dunster did not stay to reason, but impelled with the idea that this must be Theekla, and resolved to discover whether any force was being used towards her, he threw open the sash of the window, and sprang to the ground—a distance of nearly twenty feet.

At the same instant a piercing shriek, uttered in a woman's voice, broke on the silence of the night; and Marriott, recovering from the surprise into which this unexpected movement had thrown him, loosed his hold on the figure he was supporting, and, springing forward, caught Dunster in his arms.

"What is the meaning of this?" he exclaimed in a low, hoarse voice.

"It means that if you are a respectable man,

and wish to prove yourself so, you will give some account of these mysterious proceedings," replied Dunster, laudily. "Who is that you are taking away under cover of the night? What are the contents of the box you dropped into the meat a few days ago?"

Marriott started violently; evidently the charge took him by surprise.

"What has that to do with you?" he demanded.

"This much—I am a magistrate, and it is my duty to see that the laws of the country are not set at defiance."

"Very bold—very conscientious, no doubt," sneered the elder man. "Look you, my lord, this is no time for trifling. You have taken me by surprise, I confess; but remember, I hold your life in my hands, and unless you swear by all you hold sacred—unless you give me your word of honour as a gentleman to reveal nothing of what you have seen, I do not hold myself responsible for anything that may befall you."

"Do you think I am to be bribed or threatened into silence?" demanded Lord Dunster, whose hot blood was all on fire. "I decline to give the required promise!"

As he spoke he made a great effort to free himself from Marriott's grasp and get away.

The latter was a strong man, but he was older than his opponent, and at the best of times less skilful in the art of self-defence, so that if the struggle had been left to the two it would certainly have terminated in Dunster's favour.

But it was not so left, for the servant before alluded to appeared at the door, and was just able to distinguish the forms of the two men, locked together in a deadly embrace. Another moment, and Dunster was conscious of a heavy blow, apparently inflicted by a stick or some other blunt instrument on his forehead. He reeled backwards, a sudden dizziness assailing him, and then—the rest was a blank.

* * * * *

When Dunster came to himself the cold grey dawn was stealing in through the window, and, looking round, he found himself in the sitting-room where he had gone to sleep the preceding night.

He felt dazed and giddy, and there was a pain in his head. He put his hand to the spot, and found the blood from the wound had congealed round it. If it had not been for this he might have fancied the events in which he had taken part had been nothing but the result of a disordered imagination, upset by the quantity of wine he had drunk; and, indeed, as it was, he gazed round in bewilderment, half inclined to wonder whether he had not been the victim of an hallucination of some kind.

As he did so he became aware of a sickly smell emanating from a handkerchief that had dropped down beside him, and which had evidently been dipped in some narcotic—chloroform probably—and placed over his nostrils, with the purpose of inducing unconsciousness.

The handkerchief was a small one, made of the most delicate cambric, and even the chloroform was not strong enough to entirely conceal the subtle perfume of some scent that Theekla was in the habit of using. Evidently the handkerchief was hers, but surely she had not been a party to the use to which it had been put.

Making an effort to steady himself the young man rose and went to the window, and there, to his extreme astonishment, the first object upon which his eyes rested was nothing more nor less than the upturned face of the detective Pitchard, who was regarding him with the utmost interest, not unmixed with surprise.

"Why, what brings you here?" he exclaimed. "I was about asking your lordship the same question," retorted the detective. "Can you come out to me, or shall I come in to you?"

(Continued on page 208)

PATCHWORK.—PERCIVAL COOMBS' famous parcel, No. 1, contains 100 pieces coloured silks; No. 2, 300 smaller pieces; No. 3, 50 coloured velvets—either of these is 3d.; special parcel, 50 large pieces of coloured velvets, 1s. 6d.—all post free.—PERCIVAL COOMBS, Holdenhurst Road, Bournemouth.

THE LOST STAR.

CHAPTER XXV.

As Ruby was going along the passage to the schoolroom, a few days after Harold's departure for Scotland, she came upon Mrs. Nicholson, whose usually cheerful face was purple with rage.

"What is the matter?" she asked, more out of sympathy than curiosity, as she had no wish to be mixed up with any quarrel which might be occur in Lady Chester's numerous household.

"The master! You'll hear soon enough!" said the housekeeper, excitedly. "And if some people had what they deserved they would get such a hiding as wouldn't leave a whole bone in their bodies! I've no patience with them; they worry the life out of me with their follies and nonsense; and then to turn round as grave as a parson, and declare it's all for conscience sake; and they wouldn't do it—no, not was it ever so—if the Almighty hadn't put it into their heads to speak!"

"Very annoying!" murmured Ruby, not having the least idea to what she was alluding. "Wherever you go you hear the same complaints that servants are not what they used to be. But I mustn't wait!"

"Well, remember this, my dear—and excuse me for calling you so—whatever they say against you, I won't believe a word of it; and you have Sarah Nicholson's word that she will stand by you through thick and thin—through thick and thin!" she repeated, impressively, as she called down the passage, nodding her head.

"Against me! what does she mean?"

But Ruby had no time to wonder, as both the children were waiting for her to look over their sums, and she had to put everything else out of her mind to make way for the intricacies of the "rule of three."

Lady May was in a stupid mood, and nothing would make her sum come right.

The poor little thing sat, with the tears in her eyes, staring hopelessly at the slate, till Ruby, who had held out as long as she could for the child's own good, was obliged to come to her assistance; and, with a few magic strokes of the pencil, produced the right answer.

Beatrice was sitting with both elbows on the table, frowning hard at the puzzling figures, and Ruby was gently rebuking her for her attitude, when the door opened, and Mrs. Nicholson appeared on the threshold.

Portentously dignified, she requested Miss St. Heliers to be good enough to step downstairs, as his lordship, the Earl, wished to speak to her.

"To me!" she exclaimed in surprise. "Are you sure there is no mistake?"

Mrs. Nicholson shook her head solemnly.

"No mistake at all! You must come, miss; and the Earl never likes to be kept waiting! Now, Lady Marian, let the young lady go, there's a dear!"

Ruby put the child down, and, woman-like, looked in the glass to see if her hair were tidy, and her frillings unrumpled.

Smoothing her curls with her fingers, and shaking out her frills, she followed the housekeeper out of the room, nodding to the children, and telling them to be very good during her absence, before she closed the door.

When she came to the study it would be no use denying that she felt particularly uncomfortable.

Conscious that she had done no wrong, she ought to have walked into the room with her head erect and an air of innocence, such as the most prejudiced could not have mistaken; but Alverley's indiscretions robbed her of all confidence, and she felt desperately afraid that his father was about to question her concerning his relations with herself.

If so, what was she to answer?

Would he believe, for instance, that there had been no assignation at Paddington Station?

The probabilities were all against her. And it is by probabilities that the accused are judged by their self constituted judges.

Dec. 10, 1898.

Mrs. Nicholson's mysterious demeanour added to her discomfort, and it was with a loudly-beating heart that, in answer to an authoritative "Come in," she opened the door and walked into the room.

The Earl was standing on the hearthrug with his back to the fire, the Countess sitting in an armchair on the further side of the writing-table.

The countenances of both were preternaturally solemn as they bowed gravely, and the Earl pointed to a chair.

Ruby sat down, the colour coming and going in her cheeks; her hands clasped tightly together in her lap. It seemed to her the longest minute she had ever known, before Lord Chester cleared his throat, and having thus prepared the way, spoke—

"I am sorry for the necessity, Miss St. Hellers, which obliges me to ask for this interview; but I think you will acknowledge that I should not be doing my duty to my wife, or indeed to my household in general, if I passed over without notice the very peculiar circumstances which no doubt you will be most happy to explain."

He paused, as if expecting a reply.

Ruby raised her head proudly, her courage rising at the moment of attack.

"Will you tell me what those peculiar circumstances are?"

Lord Chester looked at his wife, but her eyes were averted, so he had to fall back on his own resources.

"It pains me beyond measure to have to assert such a thing, but I am informed that on the very day that my wife missed her diamond star from her dressing-case, you were seen with a star of the same jewels in your hair."

"After all, it is only about the robbery," she thought to herself, with a sigh of relief, as she looked up fearlessly into the steel-grey eyes which were watching her so intently. "It is true," she said, composedly; "the star had just been given me by a friend, and Anna, the maid, saw me with it in the schoolroom."

The Earl looked relieved.

"If that is the case perhaps you will not mind producing it, simply for the satisfaction of others—you understand? The report got about that you were seen with a star in your hand, and it naturally made a bad impression on those who knew you less well than the Countess and myself."

"I am so sorry, but I sent it away the next day."

Lord Chester's face fell.

"Sent it away! This is most unfortunate."

"Most unfortunate!" echoed the Countess.

"May I ask why you were in—in—such an extraordinary hurry to get rid of it?"

"Because I did not wish to accept it!" her cheeks burning like fire, as she thought of the giver, whose identity she was resolved to keep secret at all hazards.

"May I ask if you returned it by train or post?"

"By post. I took it myself, when I was out with your daughters."

"Diamonds are dangerous things to send in that way—witness the robbery at Hatton Garden. Did you declare their value?"

"No. I simply asked for a registered envelope, and put the case inside it."

"Then if they were lost you could claim no adequate damages. Have you heard of their safe arrival?"

"No."

"Perhaps they are lost."

"They may be for all I know."

Thoroughly puzzled he stooped down and consulted with his wife; whilst Ruby, who was beginning to be exceedingly indignant at this searching examination, wondered what was coming next.

"Would you mind telling us, in strict confidence, the name of this friend," the Earl asked, with the utmost urbanity. "You see it would be a satisfaction to all parties to have some firm point on which to take our stand."

"I cannot see that it matters to anyone but myself," with quiet dignity. "The name would

not alter the fact that I have not got the star to show you."

"No; but the friend might be applied to—to support your statement."

"The statement requires no support!" she exclaimed, in indignant surprise. "My word is surely enough to convince you!"

"Personally, of course, it must be; but I told you that others had buried themselves about this matter, so that it would have been very advisable to produce this second star for their satisfaction. I think you must see this for yourself," and the Earl rubbed his chin complacently.

"I see nothing of the kind!" and she threw back her head, whilst her eyes flashed fire. "I should not have thought of producing it for the sake of convincing a housemaid that what I said was true. If she chose to doubt my word, she might!"

The Earl frowned, and the Countess locked her fingers.

"But, my dear Miss St. Hellers," the Countess began, nervously, "in cases like the present, when every effort must be made to clear up a mystery, it will not do to let pride stand in our way. There are difficulties enough without that."

"I do not call it pride, but common self-respect," said Ruby gently, though her heart beat fast. "If I could say or do anything really to help I should only be too glad."

The Earl bowed in acknowledgement.

"You spent part of that Thursday in London if I am not mistaken?" he said.

"Nearly the whole of it; for I left by the 9.45 and came back by the five."

"You stayed in London the whole time?"

"I cannot conceive why you wish to know; but I did most certainly. If you doubt it, you can ask my aunt."

"I do not wish to doubt it, but—" he hesitated.

"But you do! Then may I inquire what is the good of asking me all these questions, when you doubt my answers? Lady Chester," she added, impulsively, "I appeal to you—for you know me better than your husband—has the Earl any right to doubt my word?"

Lady Chester looked exceedingly uncomfortable.

"I can only answer for myself," she said, confusedly. "It would never have occurred to me to do so."

"You must remember, my dear young lady," the Earl interposed, with crushing dignity, "that the present occasion must be as painful to me as it is to yourself. You are my guest, a member of my household—the daughter of an ancient and honourable house—naturally as far above suspicion as any of my own family; therefore I have no doubt that it is in your power to clear yourself entirely. If you will only bend your pride sufficiently to enter into the necessary explanations."

"Clear myself!" and she stood up with a bewildered expression in her eyes. "I don't understand!"

"I can scarcely put it plainer," and the Earl coughed. "Unfortunately, the circumstantial evidences against you is tolerably strong; and vulgar minds are entirely guided by that. Remember, I accuse you of nothing—such an idea would not enter my mind; but I will attempt to lay the case before you. At half-past one on Thursday, when you claim to having been in town, you were seen by Anna, the schoolroom-maid, in the act of turning away from Lady Chester's bedroom."

"It is a falsehood!" broke in Ruby, contemptuously; "and she knows it."

"One moment," and he waved his hand. "The stationmaster asserts that Miss St. Hellers went up by the 9.45 and came down by the 11.15—that she returned to town by the two, and came back by the five!" looking at her sharply; and as he looked he saw every scrap of colour fade from the fair young face, and a scared expression of bewildered terror replace its former fearlessness.

He was cold and callous by nature, but at that sight he turned away his eyes in pity.

"I will not detain you any longer," he said,

abruptly. "After you have had sufficient time for reflection I will see you again."

A mist seemed to gather before her eyes, but somehow she managed to find her way out of the room and up the broad staircase to the gallery above. There she stood perfectly still her hands pressed to her forehead.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"DEAR Miss Sellers, have you got a headache?" and May, who had been watching her beloved governess anxiously during tea, sprang on to her lap as soon as it was over.

"Yes, dear; but run away, it will be better when I am alone."

"Do let me stay. I won't make a noise; and Bee can go down and bring me up an orange, or something nice."

"Indeed Bee won't!" exclaimed that young lady, resolutely. "If you stay I'll stay too, and Miss Sellers shall tell us a story, which will be much nicer than going downstairs to be patted on the head by papa, and found fault with by Clem. Do you know," she said, gravely, "I think she must be very ill; she's never in a good temper; and whenever I was particularly cross, mamma always said I wasn't well. Do you think she can get better without a dose of medicine?"

"It is not right to talk too much of the faults of others," said Ruby, gently, constraining herself to be calm when she felt she must cry out in her misery. "Your sister was very kind to you on the ice; I remember you told me so."

"Oh, yes, she was kind enough then," with a grimace; "but Captain Masters was there, and she thought it made her look pretty to smile. She never scolded me once, though I knew she wanted to—it was such fun."

"Hush, Beatrice, dear, you are talking nonsense. It is time for you to go downstairs."

"But we are going to stay with you."

"Not to night, I want to be alone," with a weary sigh.

"If she doesn't want us we had better go. Come along, May," and Beatrice threw down the ball of string she was disentangling, and ran out of the room. "If you don't come quick I shall eat all the almonds."

"I shall bring some for you," said Little May, softly, as she reluctantly followed her sister.

When they were gone Ruby started from her chair and pushed back her hair. The idle chatter of the children seemed to drive her mad, and she could not get away from it; for so long as they were in the schoolroom her post was with them.

Could it be true that she, Ruby St. Hellers, had to stand on her defence against a charge of theft? It was so very absurd, quite a joke—if it were not for this dreadful fear about Violet, she might have burst out laughing at the thought of it! But she could not think of herself and her own feelings till she had cleared her mind from the horrible doubt that possessed it.

Anna might have lied, as she probably did; but the station-master was a highly respectable man, who would have had no object in inventing a falsehood about her.

If he said that he saw Miss St. Hellers come down by the 11.15 he must have some ground for the assertion; and if it were not herself whom he had seen, who could it be but Violet? Had the telegram miscarried, and had she actually come to the Chase in her absence, and met Captain Marston in spite of all the precautions taken to prevent it?

Ruby's head seemed to go round as she leant it against the mantelpiece, and the suspicion darted through her mind. She did not dare to think of the possible consequences; it turned her absolutely faint to imagine her poor, little, defenceless dove in the hands of the vulture. She could only stand still and tremble.

Violet had gone out early in the morning as if to start on some expedition, and Mrs. Cope was left under the impression that she had started for the Chase, according to the original agreement. But if she had done so, through some

mistake, she would have come up to the house and been admitted at the front door, and, in course of time, everyone would have heard of her arrival; unless—and Ruby's heart sank at the probability of that "unless"—Captain Marston waylaid her on the road, and after a long private talk somewhere in the grounds induced her to return to town with him.

The box of cigar-lights suddenly recurred to her memory. Could it have been dropped by Captain Marston, whilst talking to Violet in that very room? Her heart throbbed at the thought; but she dismissed it at once as too incredible. Violet would never have crept into the house like a thief—underhand ways were never those which came most readily to her impulsive disposition. She might have stood outside in the cold for hours, if the man she loved was by her side; but to come into a strange house and indulge in a secret *like-a-lie* was an insult to her to credit it for a moment! Had she met him? That was all Ruby wanted to know.

Fetching her writing case from a side table, she sat down with it open before her. Her hand shook so that she could scarcely guide her pen, so she laid it down and rested her head on her hand. There was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Nicholson walked in, closing it at once behind her. Ruby looked up in surprise.

"Excuse me, miss, but I couldn't keep away," and without waiting for anything else, she plumped her fat person down on the first chair she came to, and pulled out her handkerchief preparatory to turning on her waterworks. "It's cruel persecution, I call it; and that girl Anna's at the bottom of it."

"But what have I ever done to her?"

"The girl's right down mad she is; and she's took it in her head that Lord Alverley—bless his heart!—is after you. You needn't trouble yourself to deny it, for I know you could keep him at a distance if anyone could. But she's a good-looking girl, if you get over her nose, and it seems that sometimes of a morning when he met her on the stairs, he took to noticing her, and instead of boxing his ears, as a modest girl ought to have done, she seemed to like it, and want him to do it again. Ever since his arm was hurt, he's took no more notice of her than if she had been a speck of dust on the carpet—which is only right and becoming of a gentleman in his position; and she chose, like her impudence, to put this change down to you. She says he asked her to put a flower on your table one evening. 'Lor' bless you,' I said, 'that's only common civility between a gentleman and a young lady.' And he got her to bring you a note, 'which I'll be bound,' I said, 'Miss St. Heller's put straight into the fire, she's just the young lady to do it.' And she declares you wear his gold ring in the shape of a snake. 'If she does, it's very peculiar,' I said; 'for he has got the moral of it on his finger; I saw it when I was bandaging his poor arm.' So you see, miss, its rank jealousy that has made her so spiteful against you; and she's ready to swear black is white, in order to get you into trouble."

"I always knew she disliked me, but I could not imagine why."

"No; you would never have thought of it, you see, miss, being so innocent like. But what are you going to do about this business? You ought to lose no time."

"To do about it! There is nothing to be done."

"If I was you, I should take care that a great deal was done, and every stone turned, before they dragged me off to the county-gaol, with a blackened character and a ruined name," and she nodded her head, impressively.

"To gaol!" repeated Ruby, incredulously.

"Ay, to gaol! If once the Earl thinks that there is sufficient evidence against you, to gaol you must go; and he won't dare to stir a finger to prevent it. You see he is a magistrate himself, and bound to stand up for the laws of the country."

"But it is impossible! He couldn't think me guilty if he tried!"

Mrs. Nicholson sniffed expressively.

"It's my belief that magistrates have no hearts worth speaking of. The kindest-natured gentle-

man don't mind hunting a poor fox to death—all because it's in the way of sport; and a case like this is regular sport to them. Her ladyship is bound to support him; but she has took it so to heart that she can't hardly hold up her head. My dear, if you have any friends, for Heaven's sake send for them!"

Ruby twisted the serpent-ring round on her finger.

"I can't!" she said, hoarsely.

"Now don't leave it till it's too late," very earnestly. "Lies grow as fast as weeds amongst the potatoes; and there's a whole bagful about-thanks to that hussy."

"She says she saw me at half-past one outside the Countess's door."

"Yes, she says so; and John, the second footman, follows suit, saying that he heard voices up here when he was putting coals on the breakfast-room fire. I don't know what they won't be saying next!"

White as Ruby had been before, she grew whiter still.

"Voices? What sort of voices?"

"I don't know; and I wouldn't demean myself to ask. Now don't take on so, dearie," and she laid her rough hand on Ruby's little, soft one. "I'll see you through with it, if I can—and the wicked shan't triumph over you. You are just the age of my poor girl that's dead, and I took to your sweet face from the first; and though I'm a useless old woman"—beginning to whimper—"I'm better than nobody, maybe."

"A thousand times better!" and Ruby's lips quivered as she pressed the hand that lay in her lap.

"And I'll tell you what I would do, if I wore you. I would just have a bad cold, and keep to my room a bit, and not go down for a day or two. It would be better than exposing yourself to be looked at coldly by the quality. I'll explain it to the Countess, and she'll keep the young ladies to herself; and I'll see that you are not forgotten. Were you going to write a letter, my dear? because if you will do it at once, and give it to me, it shall be posted without anyone being one bit the wiser."

Ruby shrank back in horror.

"Will they dare to open my letters?"

"I should be prepared for it, anyhow; and not write more than I could help. Your room, I suppose, will be searched, and all your pretty things turned over; but I shall see that they are up to no tricks. Trust me for that!"

As well as she could, with unsteady fingers, Ruby traced a few hurried lines to her sister; and, folding them in an envelope, placed it in Mrs. Nicholson's hand. The housekeeper, after a few kindly words of encouragement, departed, and Ruby was left to face the night, as best she could—alone.

CHAPTER XXVII.

UNDER the leafless trees in Kensington Gardens, a chill east wind following them with its persistent blast, walked Violet and her lover. Her face was radiant with happiness—love in all its unclouded joy shone from her lustrous eyes, and a tremulous smile played about her lips. Marston's head was bent towards her, and all the best feelings of his nature seemed called into play by her innocent admiration.

"I've had a letter from Ruby to-day, and I must hurry home in time to answer it."

"Stop a bit!" he said. "Tell me first what she says."

"Very little; but that little is all too much—as you will perceive, when you've read it," and she pulled it out of her pocket.

"Dearest Vi!" he read out loud, "your silence perplexes me; let me know by return of post, where you were, and what you were doing, on Thursday morning.—Your own, RUBY!"

"Humph!" he muttered; "short and to the point. Your sister would have made a capital man of business. She seems in a hurry for the answer. Suppose I send her a telegram."

"But what can I say? If I tell her that I went down to the Chase, she will be so astonished

that no one saw me; and if it ever comes out that I went back by the two o'clock train, she will wonder what kept me so long!"

"Of course she will. And if she once begins to suspect that you have met that monster of iniquity, Robert Marston, she will bundle you off at once to that abut of yours in Hyde Park Gardens, and I shall never see you again."

"You couldn't come and call?" in a low voice.

"No; Lady Augusta is no friend of mine. I knew her in Bombay; so you see everything depends upon your silence."

"And to be silent is worse than anything. I never kept a thing from Ruby in my life," with a deep sigh.

"And has your life been a happy one during the last few months?"

She shivered.

"Wretched! so deploringly wretched; that I felt sometimes that I must rush out and drown myself in the Serpentine!"

"Better have come to me; I would have given you a warmer welcome," looking down fondly into her troubled face, well knowing that his own absence had been the principal cause of her misery.

"I didn't know where to find you; and—with a shy blush—"I shouldn't have come, if I did."

"Very unkind of you; you know I was longing for a sight of you, and yet you willingly stayed away."

"Not willingly!"

"Yes; by your own words it was willingly. If you had known where I was, you would not have come. Violet, I should like your love for me to have such strength in itself that it would be able to stride boldly over every obstacle. Some women are ready to give up everything on earth for the sake of the man they love—friends, position, riches, their fair name before the world—aye, even to their hopes of Heaven. That is what I call love. Do you feel one thousandth part of it for me?"

The colour came and went in her cheeks; her heart beat fast—she tried to speak, but something seemed to rise up in her throat and choke her.

"What do I ask of you?" he went on, with increasing excitement; "simply to place yourself in my hands, and trust to me. Surely that isn't much! and yet something baiks me on every side. I have already taken the preliminary steps for our marriage; but I feel convinced that at the last moment when the registrar's certificate is ready, and there is nothing but the final form to go through, yielding to your sister's persuasions, you'll throw me over."

She shook her head.

"Ruby will never forgive me for having deceived her. I shall have no one but you left."

"Then I shall come in very well as a last resort," with a short laugh. "Much obliged to you, I'm sure."

"You do not know what Ruby is to me," she said, gravely, "or you would not think it such a small thing for me to give her up."

"If you don't love me better than your sister, I could fancy it might be trying; but if you do—" and he shrugged his shoulders.

"If I do, it does not make me forget all at once that she has been ready to sacrifice herself for me from the first. I don't deserve to be happy, and I feel that I never shall!" her eyes filling with tears.

"Then if I'm not to make your happiness I will bid you good-bye at once," and his face grew very stern. "Listen to me, Violet, before it is too late, because, by Heaven! if you are always going to be pinning after Ruby, I do not what to spend my future life in drying your tears. Be ready to give up everything and everybody on earth for me—everything and everybody. Remember what I say, or it will never do for you and me to become man and wife."

Why was there no good angel to whisper a warning in her ears, as she stood still and hesitated?

"Go back to Chaterton-street, and face the old life there, with what courage you can; and, when the days are long and lonely"—his voice

softening—"remember where you might have been, and think of the man who sought you out in your poverty, and asked for nothing but your love."

She bent her head and sobbed.

He turned away slowly, but stopped, as two small hands were stretched out to him imploringly.

"Am I to go or stay?" he said, sternly.

"Stay—or I shall die!"

The words were scarcely above a breath, but he caught them, and his dark eyes gleamed with triumph. The curious glance of a stray passer-by was upon him, so that he had to restrain his raptures.

"And you will love me as much as I said?" in an earnest whisper.

"More, if possible!" still in the lowest voice.

"And my will shall be yours, in all things!"

"In all things!" she repeated, with an effort.

"And you will stick to me through good report and ill!" he persisted, enjoying the sense of his power.

"Yes; why do you ask? I have told you so, long ago, Robert," looking up at him with anxious eyes. "You will never know what it cost me, but I give myself up to you entirely. I know so little of the world, that if I am doing wrong Heaven will surely punish you as if you had misled a child."

"No matter," he said, hoarsely; "I would risk anything to have you for my own."

"The first step," she said, timidly, "is sorely against my conscience."

"But your conscience is mine, now; and that tells me that anything must be right which brings an angel to walk by my side for the rest of my life."

"But why should we be married in any other place than a church?"

"Because if our banns were put up in All Saints', Mrs. Capel might walk in one fine day and hear them. Nothing would prevent her from telling your sister, and there would be the deuce to pay, as you know."

"But if our names are put up in a registry office won't somebody find it out?"

"Not a chance of it. What could possibly take any of our friends to a registry office? Besides, as a further precaution, I have taken care to see that we figure under the names of Vera Hellers and Richard Maraton."

"I fancied that was wrong."

"You imagine that everything is wrong; but that is a fancy of which I shall soon cure you."

"I hope not, or I shall be afraid to trust you."

"Fears are forbidden."

"What is the time? I must take care not to be late for the post."

"I am going to answer Ruby, if you are thinking of that."

"But she will be so surprised at hearing from you!"

"Not if I write in your name, as, of course, I shall."

"But what will you say? It is so very awkward."

"What do you do generally of a morning?"

"Generally I stay at home; but sometimes, when there is shopping to be done, I go to Blakely's."

"Do you ever lunch there?"

"No," with a smile; "I can't afford it!"

"What do you do in the afternoon?"

"Sometimes I go for a walk, and every now and then I go to church."

"Humph! I hope you pray for me."

"I always do," very softly. And then they turned their steps homewards, and after a lingering pressure of the hand, he parted from her at the corner of Chatterton-street.

The game was in his own hands, and such is the curious nature of man, that he scarcely knew whether to be glad or sorry. If Violet had been less innocent of all the evil of the world he would have been more easy in his mind; but being as she was, he felt that he was doing a mean and cowardly thing in leading a child astray.

After all, she was so intensely charming, that he might be sure of his own constancy; and the omission of the right names was a mistake.

However, if he changed them now he might get into all sorts of difficulties, and as no one would be likely to inquire about them, the marriage might stand unchallenged for ever. Violet's small doubts were easily set at rest, and Ruby would be glad to take it for granted that all was right for the sake of her sister's character.

On his way to his club, he stopped at a telegraph office, and sent off a telegram to Ruby. Only the other day he wrote one in her name to Violet, and now it was vice versa. The crooked ways of deceit were becoming fatally easy to his feet, and he found that it was infinitely more agreeable to go down hill than up.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The telegram arrived in time to save Ruby from despair, although, through some mistake at Alverley Station, it did not reach Chester Chase till the Monday morning. All Sunday she kept to her room—a voluntary prisoner. The sound of the church bells was wafted to her across the leafless trees, but knawed by the dreadful tooth of anxiety, they brought no message of peace to her troubled heart. She could scarcely find calmness enough to pray, with this anxiety about Violet weighing like tons of lead on her mind, though she knelt for some time by her bedside with clasped hands and bowed head.

Lady Chester came in, late in the afternoon, looking very nervous, and saying that she was so sorry to hear that Miss St. Hellers was ill.

"Thank you!" said Ruby, perfectly composed but white as a sheet; "my head aches, and I have a pain in my heart."

"Dear! dear! do you do anything for it? Sal volatile, I believe, is very efficacious in some instances."

"I think the only things required are peace and change of scene."

"They are not always to be had, unfortunately," with an uneasy look out of the window, as if she were afraid to guess what was passing in her governess's mind.

"Change of scene is at all events within my reach, and I mean to try it."

"You mean you would like to spend a day or two with your sister—when—when all this worry is over?"

"I mean!" said Ruby proudly, determined to take the bull by the horns, "that when the Earl has asked me as many questions as he likes—when he is perfectly satisfied that I am neither a liar nor a thief—I shall ask your permission to leave a house where such a slur has been cast upon me."

The Countess looked aghast.

"But, my dear Miss St. Hellers, who says such dreadful things of you! You have only to tell us the name of the friend who sent you the diamond star, and the reason why you paid two journeys backwards and forwards to London on the same day—and—and all this shall be forgotten."

"Not by me, if I live to be a hundred!"

"I hope so," soothingly. "The children are devoted to you; and in so short a time the influence you have acquired over them is quite extraordinary."

"And where would that influence be?"—her lip curling scornfully—"when they grew to know—as they would know sooner or later—that the person they were so fond of had been accused of theft!"

Lady Chester nearly cried.

"They never should know it. And no one accuses you—not even my husband. He wishes you, for your own sake, to cast off this slight shadow which rests upon you."

"Then for my own sake, I wish he had let me be. I was conscious of no shadow till he brought it by his base insinuations."

"Lord Chester could never stoop to anything base! You are unjust to him; and yet it is his most earnest wish to be perfectly just to you!"

"Then he is most self-denying. I only wish my father were alive" her voice trembling with agitation—"and he would ask him if it were customary for a gentleman to doubt a lady's word!"

"He did not wish to doubt it; only you must remember the difficulty of his position when there are two witnesses against you. Ocles, the station-master, could scarcely have any motive for saying he saw you if such were not the case!"

Ruby winced; and the Countess noticed, with a pang, that her eyes fell, as she remarked, coldly—

"I believe I am to be subjected to a second examination to-morrow, so perhaps it is useless to discuss it now."

"Perfectly needless!" with a sigh, "if you close your heart against me. I thought perhaps you would like to confide to me what you might not wish to get to my husband's ears. If I could only tell him that I was satisfied he would be so glad of an excuse to drop it!"

"You are very kind," and the tears came into the earnest eyes. "You will know all some day, and then you will judge me less harshly than you do now—only I shall not be here to know it!"

"But we cannot afford to lose you," and the Countess looked really distressed. "The children will break their hearts!"

"Some day when the star turns up, and you know that I had nothing to do with its loss, perhaps you will let them see me—not till then!"

"I know it now! Indeed—indeed, I never doubted you!"

Ruby smiled faintly.

"I should be glad if you would allow somebody to search my room to-morrow, so that I might not be supposed to carry it away in my boxes; and perhaps you will say good-bye to Mrs. Nicholson for me! She was always so good to me."

The tears were running down Lady Chester's face.

"But if it is all explained away—why should you go?"

"Because I have an ounce of self-respect left. Because it would choke me to sit down to table with people who had chosen to doubt my honesty!"

The Countess sighed.

"I wish to Heaven that I had never gone to Ripley!"

"Be sure that if it had not happened that day it would another; the burglar probably laid his plans some days before."

"Do you think so? But how could he have got in?"

"Very easily, if there were no one about—either by the window of your own room, or that of the breakfast-room."

"Do you think the man passed through the schoolroom, and that it was his box of cigar-lights you found?"

"It is possible; and the strange man on the ice may be the very one who did it!"

"He seemed to know you!"

"Yes; and I suppose I must expect to have that brought up against me as well!" said Ruby, wearily.

"I was not thinking of that"—hastily—"only I wish you could identify him."

"I wish I could; but my head feels bewildered. Lady Chester," with a piteous look on her worn face, "if the Earl persists in thinking me guilty, what am I to do?"

"But he won't! You will tell him all you can to-morrow to elucidate his doubts. Believe me, nothing could please him better."

"And meanwhile, as a last favour, keep it from the children!"

"I will, most certainly. They think you are ill; and May has been teasing me all day to let her come to you. She sat next me in church, and I felt so worried and miserable—with what all this fuss in the house and the bad news about Alverley—that I could not help a tear stealing down my cheek. The child caught sight of it at once, and pointing to it with her finger, asked if that was for Miss Sellers!"

Ruby turned away—the thought of leaving those two children, with their winning ways, was almost too much for her.

The Countess, seeing that her heart was

touched, put her hand kindly on Ruby's shoulder, and whispered, softly : "For her sake, if not for your own, keep nothing back from us tomorrow," and without another word left the room.

The bad news about Alverley ! Did she mean that he would really have to lose his arm ! He had taken so little care of himself—playing with his health, as with everything else in life, and this was to be the end ! Crippled in the flower of his manhood, when the future was full of promise, and the present without a cloud !

Ruby shuddered as she thought of him deprived of all his favourite pleasures—his hunters standing idle in the stables, whilst his brother was flying over gates and bull-bauches in the wake of the hounds ; his guns left week after week in their racks, whilst partridges and pheasants were shot down by the hands of his friends and neighbours. What would become of him—cut off from all the healthier relaxations of a man's existence ! Would he turn to the gaming-table, as a last resource, and drown the bitterness of his spoilt career in the slimy waters of dissipation ? If so, it was well, perhaps, that they should never meet again—the tender plant of friendship could never thrive in such an atmosphere, for a vicious undergrowth of passion would be sure to rise and strangle it ere long.

And yet the remembrance of that friendship was very sweet to her. It had about it the charm of "stolen waters," and involuntarily she raised the serpent ring to her lips, as she laid her aching head on the pillow.

They might talk against her as much as they liked, but they would never shake his confidence in her innocence ! And it would be something to know that whatever might happen to her in the future, there was one person left belonging to Chester Chase who would never hear her conduct or character called in question, without lifting up his voice in her favour.

Could she say the same for Harold Jerningham ? She was not sure, in spite of his earnest avowement. He was so frank and straightforward himself that he would not believe in the necessity for concealment ; and any suspicion of a secret between herself and his brother would prejudice him against her at once.

What answer would the morrow bring from Violet ? Everything in life seemed to depend upon that ! If a letter came to say that her sister had spent that Thursday morning in London—well and good. Then she could look her position in the face with her usual courage, and refute the worst part of the accusation at once. But if not—Heaven preserve her—for man seemed bent on her ruin

CHAPTER XXIX.

TELEGRAM from Violet St. Heliers, Chatterton-street, to Ruby St. Heliers, Chester Chase, —shire :—

"It is difficult to remember, but I suppose I went shopping in the morning, and to church in the afternoon."

"Thank Heaven !" murmured Ruby. Her first thought, as usual, was for her sister, the second for herself.

Violet had not been down to the Chase, so she had been saved from a meeting with Captain Marston ! And now she was free to maintain the truth of her first statement, whatever the station-master or the schoolroom-maid might swear to the contrary.

Relieved from her worst anxiety, she looked so much brighter that Mrs. Nicholson was quite surprised, and asked if anything had happened.

"Only that I have had some good news from my sister," she answered, with a smile.

"Anything that will help yourself ! or I shan't think much of it."

"Yes, it will help me greatly !"

Looking out of the window, lost in thought, she was trying to make up her mind that she had a good excuse for breaking her promise to Lord Alverley. Because, if he came, he would probably do her more harm than good ; and it was almost impossible for him to come, as he

was supposed to be ill in bed. Still, turn it as she would, the promise was binding. It had been made free of all conditions. If she were in trouble, she was to send that ring to him ! She was in the extremity of trouble now—ergo—the ring must be sent.

She would not tamper any more with her conscience, so turned to the housekeeper with a slight blush—

"Dear Mrs. Nicholson, you have been so good to me that I am going to ask you to do me another kindness—it is to have a small packet sent to the post for Lord Alverley."

A look of surprise came over the plump face.

"Don't mistrust me, and I will tell you all from the beginning. When I took that bottle of medicine to Mrs. Watson, I was obliged to wait a long while in the wood because the poachers were all about."

"Bless my soul ! were you out there all the while ! I wonder you weren't frightened out of your skin !"

"I was very nearly ; for a poacher came close to me and pointed his gun at Lord Alverley, whom I could see in the distance. Fortunately, I caught hold of the muzzle and pressed it down, or he would have been killed. Lord Alverley found this out, and offered to be my good friend for life in consequence."

"To think of your saving his life, and none of us knowing a word about it !"

"No ; I begged him not to mention it. So he gave me this ring—"touching the one upon her finger—"and made me promise faithfully that if ever I were in trouble I was to send it to him, and he would come to my help."

"And you never sent it !" breathlessly. "Pop it in a bit of paper, and give it to me at once !"

"But I don't want him to come. And he's ill in bed !"

"Never you mind that, miss ; he can write, if that's all, and shame his father and mother. You give it to me."

Ruby took out a sheet of paper, and wrote :

"I send this—much against my will—according to my promise. I am in trouble, but you cannot help me ; and I earnestly pray you not to come, as you may do yourself irreparable injury. I shall be gone before you can arrive. I know that you will not believe what they say against me ; and I shall always remember your friendship and your little sisters' affection as the only pleasant memories connected with Chester Chase. Good-bye !—we shall not meet again."

She read it over, with the tears in her eyes, placed the ring in it, folded it up, and directed it.

"I have no stamp ! " she said, hoarsely.

"Never mind ! " and the housekeeper hurried out of the room, muttering : "A quarter to eleven already ; there's not much time to lose !"

But, although she was in a hurry, her wits were wide awake ; and when she had put on her bonnet she took care to let Lady Chester know that she was going down to Watson's, to ask him to send up some fowls.

"The last he sent," she added, "were as poor a lot as ever I saw."

When she was out of sight from the windows of the Chase, she hurried along as fast as her portly form would allow her. She had more than one motive for haste, as she wanted to catch Jim Watson in good time to send him off by the twelve o'clock train ; and her absence from the house on Monday morning was an event of almost unprecedented occurrence.

Jim, a long-legged boy of sixteen, was digging up his father's potato-ground when Mrs. Nicholson appeared, very much out of breath, on the other side of the hedge.

"Good-morning, Jim. Father at home ?"

"No, mum ; not yet. Tain't likely he'll be round long afore dinner."

"Here, Jim, I want to speak to you. You've got over that nasty illness of yours, and can walk a mile or two on a stretch !"

"Ten miles, and never feel a bit the worse for it. I'm as strong as ever I was !"

"Then you wouldn't object to going to town on an errand for an old woman like me !"

"Object ! I should be right down glad to go ! and the boy's eyes sparkled.

"Then you must be off by the twelve o'clock train—not a minute later—and this is what you are going for," handing him the packet over the hedge. "Take this to Lord Alverley's, 63, St. James's-street—that's close upon the Queen's palaces—anyone will tell you where to find it. Give it to Mr. Phillips—you know him—and tell him it's something his master left behind him, and he'll be in a dreadful way till he gets it. Mind, you must not lose a moment before you take it to him ; but when it is once in his hands, you can go to the Aquarium, if you like, and enjoy yourself. Tell your mother and father that you are going up to town on business for me ; and not a word of this to anyone else. Here's half-a-crown for yourself, and this for your fare. Be a good boy, and I'll employ you again." Nodding to him good-naturedly as she slipped the money into his hand, and refusing all invitations to come in and sit down, she hurried home.

As she gained her own room, and laid aside her bonnet, she thought to herself : "That girl Auna had more reason on her side than I ever imagined ! They are friends—those two—on the sly ; and lovers they are sure to be, before the year is out ! Don't tell me that a man could look on a pretty face like that, and not wish to do as much with his lips as his eyes—if only he got the chance."

Ruby employed all the morning in packing her boxes, for nothing could shake her determination to leave the Chase at the earliest opportunity. She calculated that she would probably be released from her unpleasant interview with the Earl, in time for her to catch the 4.55 train ; if not, she must go by the quarter-to-six.

Supposing that Lady Chester forgot to order the carriage for her, she would walk to the station, and ask Mrs. Nicholson to see that her luggage was sent after her as soon as convenient. Her head had ached, more or less, ever since her accident on the ice ; and subsequent events had not tended to make it better. At times she felt so dazed that she began to fear lest the blow on her temple had affected her reason, which grew into a horrible nightmare, as she tossed about restlessly on her pillow.

She was deadly pale, and dark circles were round her eyes, as in obedience to Mrs. Nicholson's summons, she followed her out of the room.

"My boxes are open, and the keys are on my table. I should like you to look through them, if you have the time, before I lock them up," she said, quietly ; as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a lady's boxes to be searched before she left the house.

"Now, don't talk like that, or I shall break down," and the housekeeper turned away brushing a tear away with the back of her hand.

Once more Ruby went down the broad staircase, and across the marble hall. The place seemed strange to her after her imprisonment in one room, and she shivered with a wretched feeling of loneliness, as she opened the study-door and walked in.

"Oh ! if Lord Alverley were only here ! " crossed her mind in a moment of weakness ; and then she bowed gravely to the Earl and Countess, and took her seat in the chair which was pointed out to her.

"I am sorry to have to trouble you again, Miss St. Heliers," began the Earl, politely ; "but I trust that this will be the last occasion on which I shall have to annoy you with any distressing questions."

Ruby bent her head, but said nothing.

"Are you prepared to inform us of the reason which caused you to pay two journeys to town on the same day ?"

"No ; because I have never done so ! " her eyes raised fearlessly to his.

"Excuse me," and Lord Chester looked considerably taken aback ; "but from your manner last time, when the matter was mentioned to you, I had cause to infer that the contrary was the case."

"I do not know what you chose to infer," and her head was thrown back proudly ; "but I do know that I told you in plain English that I was up to town by the 9.45, and returned by the 5.1."



"GOOD HEAVENS!" EXCLAIMED RUBY. TILL THIS MOMENT SHE HAD NOT FULLY REALIZED THAT THEY SUSPECTED HER.

"And you deny that you returned to the Chase in the interim?" watching her face with a close scrutiny that was very trying.

"Most emphatically!"

"Then the schoolroom-maid's assertion that she saw you standing by the door of the Countess's bedroom is untrue?"

"As false as possible!"

"You will allow that it is very strange that the girl's story should be supported by the station-master."

"Very strange! Somebody seems to have been personating my ghost."

"Such an absurdity as that cannot be credited for a moment!"—dignity almost subduing into pettishness. "I really scarcely know what is the proper course to pursue in a case like this, when it would distress me beyond measure to proceed to extremities. You see," he resumed, after a pause, "there is the evidence of two witnesses against you."

"The evidence of half the world cannot alter the fact that I spent that morning and most of the afternoon with my aunt, Lady Augusta Craven."

The aristocratic name had its due effect upon the Earl. It seemed such a monstrous thing to accuse Lady Augusta's niece of theft, and his manner to Ruby became more urbane.

"Your aunt would, of course, be prepared to support your statement!"

"Not prepared; because I don't suppose anything could astonish her more than to hear such a thing was necessary."

"Still she would support it if we were under the unpleasant necessity of applying to her?"

"Undoubtedly she would. She would tell you that I was with her from ten o'clock till past four, when she lent me the carriage to go round by my sister's, on the way to Paddington."

"This ought to be conclusive," and the Earl, considerably puzzled, shook his head. "Of the girl's assertion I should think but little, if it stood alone. It might be made from the basest of motives—to implicate you in a crime, the

suspicion of which might fall on herself; but Odeon is clear from any doubt of his impartiality. He simply mentioned the circumstances of your double journey, when trying to account for every ticket that had passed through their hands during the day."

"As I am in mourning anyone about my height and dressed in black, might look the same in the eyes of a casual observer."

The Earl smiled. He thought that a man must be half blind if he could not distinguish the difference between the exquisitely graceful figure of Miss St. Helliers, and that of most of the women about there.

"We will pass on to that other little matter of the diamonds," he said, after a pause. Lady Chester looked up, and fixed her eyes imploringly on Ruby. "I think, after these few days of quiet reflection, you will have come to the conclusion that it would be as well to confide to us the name of the giver, in order to prevent any little unpleasantness which might arise on this subject."

"I will tell you so much and no more," she said, resolutely. "He was a man who had no right to offer me a present at all, and I regarded it as little short of an insult. Ask Anna; she will tell you that the jewel case, fresh from Howell and James's, was lying on the table when she came in. Ask the post-mistress at Alverley, and she will tell you that I sent off a registered packet by the half-past twelve o'clock post on the next morning."

"I have inquired, and I find that such is the case."

"And the post-mistress, being a person of greater veracity than Ruby St. Helliers, is believed at once."

"Miss Tompkins, having no interest in the matter, is above suspicion," said the Earl, coldly. "I should like Miss St. Helliers to know, that if she would tell us the name of her friend, it should never pass our lips;" and the Countess looked once again entreatingly at Ruby.

"I cannot see what difference it could make."

Supposing old Mr. Upton had given it to me, good would it do to you to know it?"

"All the good in the world!" said Lord Chester, quickly. "By application to Mr. Upton, we could have the direct assurance that this star was not my wife's."

"And you think it was! Good Heavens!" she started from her seat, and laid one trembling hand on the back of the chair. Till this moment she had never fully realized that such could really be the case.

"We don't know what to think!" very gravely.

"And I have lived in your house for nearly three months!" speaking very slowly, her hand pressed to her throbbing forehead. "You have known who my father was—as good and honourable a man as ever lived. You have let me live on loving terms with your children—and then—with a little gasp—"you call me a thief! I thought you couldn't mean it really—that there was some mistake about it!" looking pitifully into his impassive face, as if for an explanation.

"I wish there were," he said solemnly. "But much as it will distress both my wife and myself, if you persist in your obstinacy, I shall have to apply to one of my brother magistrates for a warrant against you. It would not be well for me to sign it myself against one of my own household."

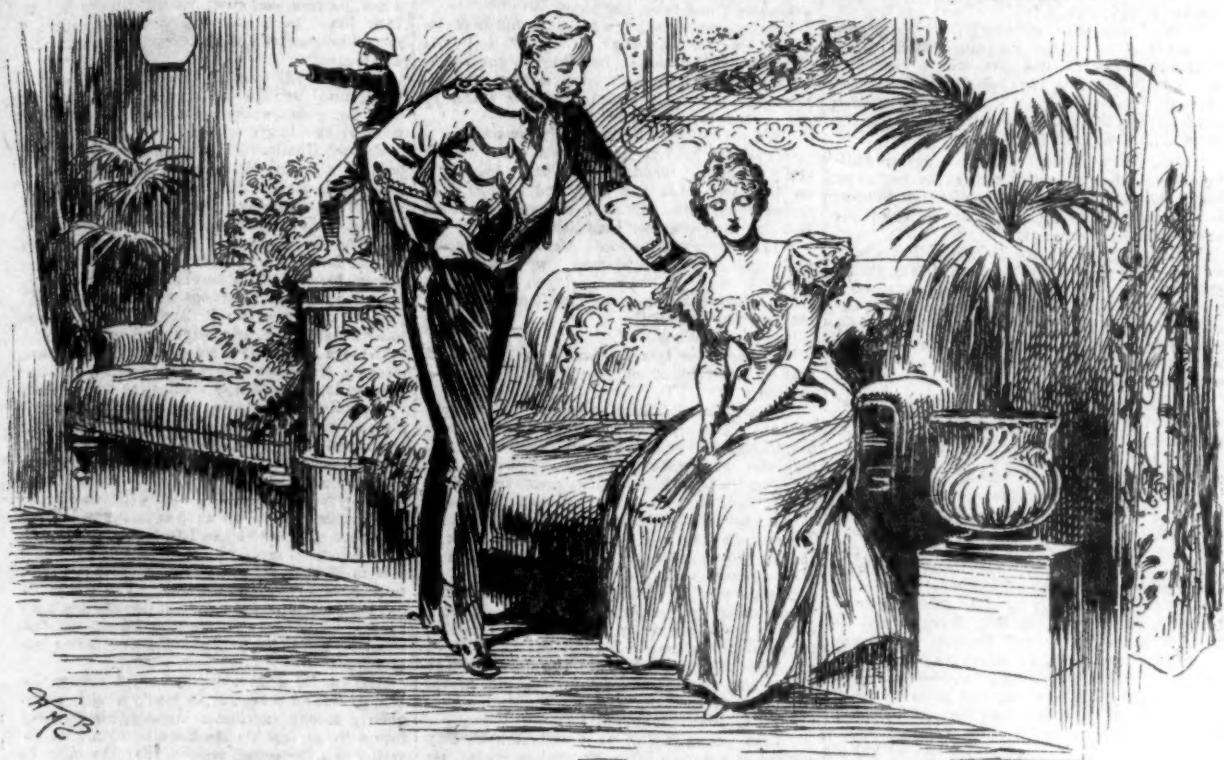
With great effort, she regained her courage.

"Do as you like," she said composedly, though she was white to the lips. "If I told you his name, you would bring up something else against me; for I am a defenceless girl, without father or friend."

"Not friend!" said a musical voice behind her, and looking round in mute amusement, as her heart nearly bounded out of her bosom, she saw Lord Alverley standing at a few yards distance!

(To be continued.)

THIS STORY COMMENCED IN NO. 1851. BACK NUMBERS CAN STILL BE HAD.



WHEN THE DANCE IS OVER COLONEL CHESTER LEADS EVE INTO THE CORRIDOR ADJOINING.

AS BROWN AS A BERRY.

CHAPTER IV.

"EVE, what do you think!"

It is Berry, bursting into the room, with crimson cheeks and eyes wide open with dismay. "My dear, I have no time to think. I am too busy," answers Eve, listlessly, seated in the middle of the room on the floor, with her boxes turned out to sort and rearrange before packing to go to the dépôt. Eve is always listless, and always busy—now striving, perhaps, to hide the former fact in the latter. But Berry's next words arouse her and awaken a faint blush.

"Papa has asked Colonel Chester to dinner to-night!"

"Has he? very well."

"It is not very well, it is dreadful! What are we to give him?"

"Dinner, I suppose, as he is coming for that purpose."

"And if he came for you, I suppose you would not even refuse him yourself on that principle!" queries Berry, meaning to be sarcastic; vexed at what seems to her unpardonable indifference to her news and the always uncertain state of the larder.

"I should take time to consider."

"Eve!"

"Berry, I think my heart is broken!" and the girl no longer calm and unconcerned, buries her face in her hands and bursts into an uncontrollable fit of weeping. In a moment all cause of complaint is forgotten, and Berry is on the floor beside her holding her tightly in her arms and drawing down her pretty golden head on to her shoulder. She does not speak, only coos over her like a mother over a grieving child, strokes her hair, and kisses her eyes, wondering all the time what this love can be like, that has so changed her sister.

By-and-by Eve lifts her face, a tear-stained

face, child-like in its expression, but full of womanly woe.

"It was the heat, and I am tired," she asserts, yet at the same time looks defiantly into Berry's eyes to see how far she has betrayed herself.

"Let me send for Ronald—do!"

"No, no, it is too late!" shaking her head sadly.

"He would come, I know."

"I don't think he would, even if I wished it; and I am not sure I do wish it."

"How incomprehensible you are!" wistfully.

"I suppose I am. I don't even understand myself," and Eve gives a gentle sigh, which Berry echoes—echo-like, with added force. This trouble being beyond her, she returns to more mundane affairs.

"I must go into the town and get something I suppose; but what?—in the name of everything comestible—what?"

"There are lots of things to be had just now!"

"Not when you have got ten shillings and three pence-halfpenny to last to the end of the week! And this is Wednesday!"

"And this is Wednesday!" repeats Berry, dubiously.

"Pity we neither of us possess the culinary skill of Rebecca, who made goat's flesh taste like venison. I suppose we could not even dress a chicken to resemble a guinea-fowl!"

"No, I am afraid not," answers Berry, still grave. She feels that the credit of her house-keeping faculty is at stake, and yet it is so difficult to manage on the small sum which is grudgingly doled out to her.

She produces her little purse, and empties it into her lap. Nine shillings, two sixpences, and a threepenny bit.

"And I have a halfpenny, too; somewhere loose in my pocket;" she says, diving deep into it, but finding nothing.

"Never mind the halfpenny," observes Eve, impatiently; "that won't buy anything."

"Won't it, though! It will buy a halfpenny worth of mint for sauce if we have lamb."

"Only, unfortunately, lamb is not in season," laughs Eve blithely.

She is recovering now, and is quite willing to lend the help of her genius in making suggestions for Berry to carry out.

"It must be a dinner strictly à la Russe," she says, still smiling.

"All flowers and fruits!"

"Yes, only the worst is, that fruit is ruinous just now—and even flowers cost money."

"Flowers I can manage. I shall call on Mrs. Payne and tell her I am going to beg some from Lady Blanche; I can answer for it that in her anxiety to show that she has the better garden, and a hot-house, she will send us her very choicest ones!" declares Berry, with a mischievous grin.

"Child, what a schemer you are!" rebukes Eve, but in a very gentle voice, for she is too fond of her wild, bright-eyed, scapaceous of a sister to find fault quite in earnest.

"One's obliged to resort to artifice sometimes—when one is poor," soberly.

"A veritable little, modified, street gamin! I shall expect to see you turn a Catherine wheel directly, and begging for a copper."

"And," continues Berry, "I shall not be playing on anyone's feelings for a fraudulent end—unless—unless—" she stops short, remembering her resolution to have nothing more to do with Eve's amatory difficulties.

"I don't know what you mean," says Eve, coldly. "Had you not better settle something more about the dinner? Soup we have in the house, but how we are to knock an *entrée* into Susan's stupid head, I don't know! She is sure to resent it as an unwarrantable innovation."

"Then there is the pudding."

"I'll make that while you are out. But a joint, Berry! Joints are so expensive."

"Neck of mutton is cheapest, and is not so very bad boiled. We will try it at my rate; and, perhaps, if I don't pay for that I could

squeezes out something savoury that would pass muster as an *entrée*."

"Only," says Eve, warningly, as Barry puts on her hat before the cracked looking-glass, "take care not to use the words *entrée* or *entremet* downstairs, or everything will fall through. Susan is such a staunch Presbyterian she is sure to think it is a Jesuitical device of the Pope to lure her from her faith."

"And, Berry!" she calls out again, half-laughingly, and yet half in earnest, as her sister leaves the room. "Do persuade her not to come in with dirty hands and humiliate us all by the announcement 'tea's ready.'"

Bat Berry by this time is nearly downstairs, so does not respond. Eve throws everything back in the boxes, and, tucking up her sleeves, prepares to visit the kitchen—Susan's well defended stronghold. For once she is not utterly impracticable. She seems rather to enjoy the novelty of a guest, and more likely to err from excess than lack of zeal.

She and her two young mistresses are hard at work all day; and, after all, the result is a very simple one—simple almost to frugality.

At night, however, when Colonel Chester comes, he sees no sign of confusion—noting that this is no ordinary affair to them. Barry, it is true, has flushed cheeks, which might have betrayed her; but he has no eyes for anyone but Eve—and she is so fresh, cool, and smiling, as though puddings, side-dishes, and sauces were utterly beneath her concern.

On the whole, everything is tolerably prosperous; but, at the outset, Barry is dumb-founded at seeing Colonel Chester calmly appropriate the seat she had meant for herself, and before which she had placed all the worst knives and the most battered spoons and forks she could find, while all the best had been carefully picked out for him.

She clasps them angrily together with her soup-plate as she thinks of their comparative brilliancy being wasted on her, while those others are probably coming under his keen ridicule, and will, perhaps, be laughingly described at the mess-table to-morrow.

But Colonel Chester notices nothing—not even that the spoon which carries his highly-flavoured soup to his mouth has long ago parted with every bit of silver it may once have possessed. Neither does he smile, when Susan, after puzzling for several minutes over the futility of handing anything to people who have no plates before them, at last cuts the Gordian knot, by putting down the dish of beef olives before Eve, who is at the end of the table, and then moving away to avoid discussion.

Berry crimsoned and nearly laughs, but Eve deems it best to take it quickly, and help it as though it were the most natural thing in the world to have an *entrée* on the table; and, reassured by this, Susan gains courage, and makes no more glaring mistakes.

The conversation flags. Captain Cardell is never great talker unless he is on the subject of his grievances, and he wisely decides not to bore his present guest with these. There is something about Colonel Chester's face so markedly unsympathetic that the very beggars in the streets seldom solicit alms from him; and his name is never seen on any subscription-list, nor in connection with any charity.

Presently Eve rises, and Barry following into the other room, the gentlemen are left alone.

The dessert is a limited one, scarcely deserving the name—a plate of sweet biscuits, a decanter of sherry, and a jug of claret. The flowers, as Barry had guaranteed, are lovely, and cover the table completely; so that, after all, there would not have been room for anything more elaborate, and the choicest fruits would have been wasted on Colonel Chester when Eve is once gone.

He looks so persistently at the door that Captain Cardell guesses what he wishes, and proposes a speedy adjournment, which is eagerly carried out.

The two sisters are whispering confidentially at the window, when they enter the sitting-room; but directly they are seen Barry starts away, and

Colonel Chester, after a moment's hesitation, crosses over and takes her place.

"It was very good of Captain Cardell to invite me in this friendly way. I enjoy it so!" he observes in a low voice; but Barry is not out of ear-shot, and hearing the remark, makes a grimace. What has been a banquet to them is evidently not regarded by him!

"We are very glad to see you," answers Eve.

"It is very kind of you to say so; but do you really mean it?" bending down until his face is on the level with her own, and he can gaze undisturbed into her eyes of sweet sea-blue. But she turns away her head half-anxiously.

"It is not polite to doubt the truth of one's civil nothings," she answers, with a forced smile.

"I wish there were no question of civility between you and me."

"Colonel Chester!"
"I mean what I say. Can't you understand that there might be something better—truer—sweeter!"

"Won't you sit down, Colonel?" interrupts Captain Cardell, coming up to them fussy hospitable, and full of importance, but to his daughter his presence seems very opportune.

"There will be some coffee, presently. I suppose!" he goes on, drawing up a chair and seating himself, while Colonel Chester follows his example; and then the two men fall into a military talk of the impending move, and probable destination of the regiment.

Eve sits near, in a high-backed chair with faded green covering, brightened by one of those hideous antimacassars that seem expressly knitted for furnished houses and lodgings. Her hands are folded idly in her lap, and she does not look up until the mention of a well-known name makes her colour rise. Then she lifts her eyes. It is Colonel Chester who is speaking.

"That young fellow they call Ronald May seemed very cut up before he went on leave. He came to me for permission to exchange into another regiment, but I refused. I felt unwilling to lose so good an officer; and, besides that, could not help thinking it a pity for him to forfeit so many years' service for a mere whim. He is high up in the lieutenants now, and would only too surely repeat the ruining of his career by-and-by had I granted his request."

"Still, if he wished it," suggests Eve, in a low voice; but Captain Cardell breaks in roughly.

"Nonsense, a boy like that does not, cannot know his own mind. His wishes count for nothing."

"It was a love affair, perhaps; and don't you think the lady will have done sufficient damage in breaking his heart, without spoiling his life as well?" asks the Colonel, with a smile.

"Poor fellow!" ejaculates Barry behind his chair; and turning round sharply he looks curiously into her face to see if by any chance she can be the object of Ronald May's hopeless passion. But the eyes that meet his are innocent of gaiety, and though the tears are glistening there they do not fall, and it is evident pure pity has prompted them.

Captain Cardell follows the direction of his gaze.

"Did you know anything of this, Barry?" he asks, sternly, remembering the lecture he had given her some days ago; and realising, for the first time, that he will soon have two grown-up daughters to take care of. He must guard against any such romantic attachment as this would be—more than ever now when luck is so against him, and the depôt, which looms before him for the next two years, would be doubly dreary with the companionship of a love-sick girl.

Berry reads the thoughts of both, and smiles with an inward pitying comment on their blindness.

"I never heard him say a word about exchanging," she answers, truthfully, but with certain reservations. "And he was in such high spirits when I saw him last!"

"The see-saw spirits of boyhood," observes Colonel Chester, with a little contemptuous shrug. "I am quite satisfied now that I was not

wrong in refusing him. This trouble will make a man of him, and everyone must suffer once in their life. It is rather a premature affair, I should say, and will right itself the sooner. He will forget."

"Yes, he will forget," agrees Eve, in a gentle voice, that betrays nothing of her thoughts. Only Barry hears the undertone of regret and wonders how it will all end.

Colonel Chester is utterly unsuspecting. For perhaps the only time in his later life, he has acted with perfect disinterestedness and single-mindedness of purpose; and, after the manner of fate, the virtue threatens to be visited on him as a sin. If he had only known for whose sake the handsome young amateur was suffering so keenly, he would have furthered his wish to go only too willingly, perhaps even added an impetus to his departure! But love is never so blind as when a clear sight is most required.

Captain Cardell smiles complacently when, later on, his guest bids them farewell, and expresses his intention of calling at the earliest opportunity. Eve looks, too, a little gratified at his unusual expressiveness; only Barry, slipping behind the door, purses up her mouth into a pout, showing plainly that she, at any rate, will not welcome his reappearance.

The hero of the evening wends his way homeward, unconscious, or at least careless, of the thoughts of those he has left behind him. His mind has been made up before now, and it would take more than the opposition of those two girls to turn him from his purpose. The father, of course, will be on his side—all parents are alive to the advantage of a wealthy son-in-law, and this man more than others. He can see no fear of failure.

And yet for a lover on the eve of success, the bridegroom expectant of so lovely a girl, a singularly moody expression wrinkles his forehead into a frown, and his teeth are so firmly set together in some secret resolve, that the cigar he has been mechanically smoking falls to the ground, bitten through.

CHAPTER V.

THE officers of the "Pinks" were much astonished, a few days later, at receiving a proposal from their Colonel to give a farewell dance to the inhabitants of the little town who had feasted and made much of them during the last two years.

Naturally there were no objections made. The young fellows were, as usual, ready for anything in the shape of gaiety, and those who had outgrown their taste for every festivity of whatever description were cautious in not running counter to their commanding officer's very evident wish.

Some surprise, of course, there was, and attendant gossip as well; for Colonel Chester had hitherto studiously avoided any ball or party at which dancing might take place—giving his permission to anything of the sort at the mess half reluctantly, and his presence just long enough for the exigencies of etiquette. Probably the only one who shrewdly guesses the cause of this sudden change is Major Lennox, and he immediately communicates his suspicions to his little favourite.

Berry is aghast at the prospect of what she has vaguely feared really coming to a consummation; all power of speech seems to leave her, and for a few moments she can only stare at her informant with angry, indignant eyes.

"I am afraid it is only too true," he affirms, gravely.

"Oh! if she should marry him!" she gasps.

"Do you think she will?"

"How can I tell? He is rich and we are very poor."

"Tremendous odds in his favour," mutters the Major, pulling his long moustache thoughtfully.

"And papa likes him."

"That is an accident which does not often occur," is the muttered comment on this; but Barry is too full of the threatened trouble to heed it.

"What does Lady Blanche think of it—and him?" she questions, anxiously.

"Oh! it she knows nothing; of him she thinks everything that is good, of course. You know it is her nature to be in charity with all men."

"Even Mrs. Payne!" says Berry, irritated, perhaps for the first time, at her friend's unfailing amiability.

"Well, that would be putting the case as strongly as it would be possible to do; but she never says a word against her, only laughs and shrugs her shoulders—and that from my wife—"

"Is very strong condemnation, worse than the proverbial 'faint praise'!" laughs the girl, recovering her good humour.

"Exactly; and now, about the dance. Will Captain Cardell go?"

"I think so. Colonel Chester called yesterday and made a great point of it; besides, in any case, Eve would go."

"Yes, I suppose so. It would not be difficult to find a chaperone, and if this gets known—"

"Oh! Major Lennox, don't—don't speak of it as a certainty! It would break my heart to see her go out to India without us, and with that man!"

Nothing could describe the intense scorn and dislike expressed in the words "that man!" Poor little Berry, utterly unversed in the ways of the world, has no idea of the policy of silence, and the advantage it would be to herself to keep on friendly terms with her prospective brother-in-law—if, indeed, it ever happens that he should stand in that relationship to her. Whoever had been present would have heard her sentiments expressed in the same unsophisticated manner; but fortunately, her then hearer is the least likely of all men to repeat what she has said.

"My dear, he is a gentleman!" is the half-reproving reply.

"That is not everything."

"Indeed. I think it is," answers Major Lennox, laughing; but in spite of the jesting tone, to his heart he half believes in the truth of what he has said.

His creed is perhaps a narrow one; but it would be well if no man had a worse. Doing one's duty as a soldier and as a gentleman. Keeping one's honour clear is no noble nor uncommon thing, and yet it is often men like these, and not better ones, who form the heroes of which nations boast!

And then Berry goes home, running half the way, and bursting into their sitting-room, finds Eve alone.

"Oh, Eve! don't go to this wretched ball!" she exclaims, impulsively, throwing herself on the floor and twining her arms round her sister's knees.

Eve looks up from the white work she is hemming, in some surprise.

"Why, what is the matter now?" she asks, smiling.

"It is Colonel Chester again, and I wish we had never seen him. He got up this ball, and Major Lennox says he wants to marry you, and—"

"And what is he going to do with Lady Blanche? Amiable as she is, I don't think even she would submit to be so summarily elated."

"Don't be so absurd, you know what I mean. It is Colonel Chester who wants to marry you, of course."

"Don't you think we had better wait and let Colonel Chester speak for himself?"

"Eve, how heartless you are! If I were as beautiful and cruel, I would kill myself for fear of the mischief I should do!"

"My dear, you would do nothing of the sort. Wait and see."

"What do you mean?"

"That you are very pretty now, and will be prettier still. Then the cruelty will follow. I think no woman would sacrifice one iota of her beauty to spare her lover even the death-pang. It is our nature."

"Your nature, perhaps, not mine!" asserts Berry, stoutly.

"We are all the same—only human."

"You are not even that. You have a stone instead of a heart."

"I wish I had. Oh! if I could only—only stop the beating here!" pressing her hand to her side, and drawing in her lips as though actually in pain.

"Eve, be your better self. Send this man away; and if you will not marry Ronald, at least marry no one else."

Eve does not answer, only sighs; and Berry, looking up, notices how wan and weary-looking she has become these last few days, and feels a little compunction for all her hard thoughts and words.

"If Ronald would only come back!" she exclaims, earnestly.

"It would be no good. You know I made up my mind long ago to marry for money."

"Such promises are best broken."

"Shall you break yours?"

"No. I am not likely to be tempted even, if all men are like those I have yet seen and heard of! As for Colonel Chester, he is positively repulsive; and Ronald—if Ronald were a real man, the sort of man a soldier should be—he would not ask your leave, he would marry you—will you tell me?"

"I am afraid it would take more than even a real soldier to do that; I am afraid a whole army could not compass it!" laughs Eve, scornfully; and Berry's pity for her half melts away, seeing that she can jest now, and on that subject. She does not know of the sorrow that is too deep for words—the tearless agony of a self-inflicted pain!

"After all," she says, triumphantly, "I don't see how you can go to that dance—you have nothing fit to wear!"

"That can be easily remedied. Papa gave me five pounds this morning."

"Oh, Eve! what shall you buy!" gasps Berry, excitedly—woman-like forgetting everything more serious in the all-engrossing topic of dress.

"White tulle and daisies."

Berry looks and feels dumbfounded. Her sister's intended purchase seems to her the height of extravagance.

"Don't you think a washing-grenadine would look as well?" she suggests, timidly.

"I am not going to try."

"Or a silk slip. There is nothing like a silk slip for wear, and it turns and cleans so well, too."

"If I am to be Mrs. Chester, there will be no need for that wretched economy ever again."

"And so you are going to sell yourself for mere comfort, scarcely luxury! Indeed, I think if it were known you were in the market, you might fetch more, and the purchaser might be in a more desirable connection. I wonder how you can tolerate that dreadful man, with his colourless complexion, and cold, expressionless eyes!"

And then, astonished at her own audacity, at the temerity with which she has taunted her beautiful elder sister, whom, until lately, she has held faultless, Berry throws her arms round her neck and attempts to draw down her face to her level. But Eve pushes her away and rises to her feet.

"You are over-excited, child," she says, frigidly. "Oblige me by not mentioning this again until you take a less exaggerated view of the case, and can discuss it rationally."

And thus gathering up her limp, faded gown with the air of an offended queen, she sweeps out of the room, and Berry is left to think over what has been said, and reflect on the unadvisedness of ever interfering with Eve when once she has resolved on anything, however rash or wrong. With all her soft ways and sweetness she is very obstinate; and even, when a child, opposition had only made her more determined.

The evening of the dance comes at last; and peace having been restored, Berry assists at the lengthy toilette, which begins soon after their early tea is over.

Although entirely free from the smaller vanities of women, Eve is quite sensible of her beauty, and knows well how to heighten its effect. The choice she has made of a dress for that evening proves, so far as the adornment of herself might go, wealth will not be wasted on her.

The soft, billowy masses of tulle, gathered back with large starry dailes and falling in graceful

folds behind her, speak sufficiently well for her taste; and, if more were needed, the smaller touches which make up the whole, are equally unexceptional. Her bright hair is braided into a coronet, and the three modest crimson-tipped flowers which are fastened there are as effective, if not so expensive, as a circlet of diamonds might be on a brow less fair.

Berry twines a string of pearls in the delicate lace ruffle round her neck, and then stands back to look.

"It is perfect!" she says, in an impressive whisper.

"You think I shall do?" smiles Eve.

"I think you are beautiful. Far too beautiful for that man!"

And then, fearing another reproof like the last, Berry runs from the room without giving time for a reply, and descending to the sitting-room finds her father pacing impatiently up and down.

"Will she never be ready?" he asks, crossly.

"She is ready now. And oh! papa, how proud you will be when you go into the room with her. There will be no one half so beautiful there—there is no one so beautiful in the world!"

"Nonsense, child," says Captain Cardell, gruffly; but all the same he is mollified, and waits his daughter's arrival more quietly after that.

And Eve, left alone, turns to the old cracked looking-glass and surveys herself calmly and dispassionately. She knows as well as the most virulent of her detractors that her eyebrows are perhaps a shade too faintly traced, her mouth perhaps a little bit too wide to claim perfection. But now that, for the first time, she feels she has done justice to her taste and to herself, she knows, too, that she is very, very fair.

Unconsciously she echoes Berry's parting words, "Too beautiful for that man!" and half admits it true. And yet who knows? Fate is so uncertain; and it is not always the loveliest women who are the most successful in life!

Rich gentlemen are scarce. And, to do her justice with all her vaunted heartlessness, Eve would rather stay in poverty for ever than marry a man who in everything but wealth would be her inferior. If Colonel Chester becomes her husband she will never need to blush for him, and, who knows, in time she may learn to love him! He is handsome and high-bred—what can she want more?

But all her sophistry does not deceive herself. She knows that her love for Ronald will not so easily die out, and while that is in her heart nothing but his presence can satisfy the restless craving ever there. It is with a very hopeless sigh and weary tread that she turns to go downstairs, and she hurries into the cab that is waiting without listening to her father's delighted prattle.

When they drive up to the mess entrance, Captain Cardell jumps out to assist her, and as she alights, his thin, sallow face flushes with gratified pride, for there, waiting on the threshold with bared head, is Colonel Chester.

He comes forward to meet them at once.

"You are late, Miss Cardell, but I kept back the dancing until your arrival. Will you come in now?"

He looks very handsome and distinguished in his full-dress uniform, and though he has always somewhat of a saturnine expression, still his is a face and figure that would never pass unnoticed. As Eve goes up the broad, softly-carpeted stairs, with her tiny gloved hand resting on his arm, she cannot help feeling a certain satisfaction in his appearance. It goes far towards a man's chance of success when the woman he loves sees and acknowledges his attractions.

Their entrance causes a considerable stir. Not only is any public attention of the Colonel's an unusual occurrence, but Eve's dress is noticed the moment she enters, and appraised correctly by every woman in the room. Then ensues an animated discussion in undertones as to the cause of both effects, and arriving at something like an accurate conclusion, Eve is soon the centre of attraction.

Lady Blanche, who is receiving the guests, leans forward with a smile.

"What does it all mean? Am I to resign my office?" she asks, banteringly.

But the band at this moment strikes up its loudest strains, obviating all necessity for a reply, and Eve passes on with a puzzled stare and deprecating shrug of the shoulders.

It is "My Queen" waltz they are playing, and, almost as a matter of course, Colonel Chester passes his arm round his companion's waist, and whirls her in among the dancers. Eve is nothing loth—women like these masterful ways—and she is glad, too, to escape the questioning glances which meet her on every side.

When the dance is over Colonel Chester leads her into the corridor adjoining, where coloured lights are burning, and soft couches line either wall, while the most beautiful flowers that autumn can supply are shedding their fragrance everywhere around. Then, when she is seated, he stands beside her, looking down straight into her eyes, and trying to read what they betray.

They are lowered quickly, but even if he could see through the milk-white eyelids, there would be nothing there which would make his heart beat one whit faster. A certain pleasure at conquest, perhaps—or even a subdued delight at an ambition attained at last—but neither now, nor ever, any love for him. It is no maiden modesty that keeps her head bent and her fingers intertwining so restlessly one with another—only indecision, and a little fear because the time has come when she can hesitate no longer.

"Do you care about dancing this next?" asks Colonel Chester, presently.

His tones are so clear and self-possessed that she starts and trembles, wondering whether, after all, she is mistaken—whether it is only gallantry, not love, that has caused him to single her out with his attentions. His next words reassure her.

"If you do not I should be glad. I have so much to say to you to-night, and there are so few opportunities of seeing you alone."

"I will stay here if you wish it."

"I do wish it. I want to keep you with me always. Miss Cardell, will you be my wife?"

Plain words and unmistakable; and yet, as they are spoken, the girl feels a sharp thrill of disappointment. If the choice had not been given her, all might have been well even now. Ronald is not gone beyond recall, and poverty seems easier to bear now that it may be passing from her for ever.

Her hands are very still, clasped tightly together in her lap; her eyes stare straight beyond and see nothing. Hearing and thinking have become so acute that all other senses seem deadened for the time.

"Don't let me hurry you, take time to consider. I have surprised you, perhaps?"

He speaks very gently, and Eve is grateful for his considerateness, but it is as if she were turned to stone, and she cannot even now reply.

"I will go and come again. You would prefer being left alone."

She bows her head. When he is gone perhaps she will be able to collect herself, and realise her good fortune without these useless, regretful fears.

She is practically alone when he disappears, for she is at the farthest end of the corridor, and in the shadow of a heavy damask curtain, and the few couples who had strolled out to rest return to the ballroom directly the music recommences.

A long row of doors is on one side, the officers' bachelor quarters, and as her eyes fall on them half-unconsciously, the first one opens and she gives a little cry, for it is Ronald May who stands before her. At the sound he starts and turns.

"Eve, is it you?"

"Ronald!"

"Yes; I could not keep away knowing I should meet you here. I only heard of the

dance last night, and came away early this morning."

Glaucio furtively up, she sees his dress is dirty and travel-stained, his face pale and very weary-looking, as though he had not rested since she saw him last. He seems to have aged, too, and there is such a despairing expression in his eyes that she shivers, and makes a movement to go.

"No, stay! he pleads, earnestly. "Who knows when and where I may look upon your face again?"

"Where have you been?" she asks, aimlessly—not from curiosity, but because she must speak or scream; the pain is so hard to bear.

"In the north of Scotland. Ostensibly shooting grouse, but, in reality, thinking only of you—yearning for you, and longing for you—until I was half ashamed of my womanish grief, and the love that not even your scorn could kill."

"Oh! Ronald, why did you come? Why torture yourself and me?"

"Eve, what is it to you? You who refused to marry me. You who denied even a past love for me!"

"You believed I did not care!"

"I could not doubt your word. Before, I would have staked my life that what I read in your eyes was love—love for me! And yet, Heaven knows I am not naturally vain!" says the poor boy, with a wistful smile.

"It was true," she murmurs, below her breath. "I loved you then, I—I love you now."

"Eve, my own, my darling! But why?"

He half falls at her feet, but she motions him aside with a little haughty gesture. The words he could not utter she finishes for him.

"Why? Because I knew I could not be happy with anyone in poverty—not even you. It was better to let you think I did not care, than give you a hope that never could be realised. I was cruel to be kind, and if you had not come to-night you would never, never have known how I have suffered too!"

"Eve, Eve! I forgot every word you have said, and I will not remember it, I promise. If you love me, I will work and make you a fortune. I will leave the service, I will—"

But with her pale, proud face before him, in spite of all its sweet womanly beauty, resolute and cold, he knows his prayers are hopeless, and stops short with a wild, despairing groan.

"Oh! my darling, my darling, be pitiful. Be just to yourself; that is all I ask!"

"Hush, Ronald, it is useless. Go! There is someone coming."

"Then for the last time—farewell!"

He catches her in his arms and clasps her tightly to him, kissing her hair, lips and eyes with passionate, desperate fervour, murmuring over her fond, caressing names, for the sake of the love to which she was not strong enough to keep true.

Inside, the band is playing still the soft, sad strains of the waltz that is called "Geliebt und verloren" (Loved and Lost). Neither recognises the air, appropriate as it is. In another moment Ronald May is gone, and Eve's last chance of averting the fate which one stronger than she has already willed, is over now for ever.

(To be continued.)

THE deserts of Arabia are specially remarkable for their pillars of sand, which are raised by whirlwinds, and have a very close resemblance in their appearance to waterspouts.

IN France the State has a monopoly for the sale of matches and tobacco. Nearly thirty-five million matches were manufactured in France during 1897 and about fifty millions were brought from other countries. About nine hundred matches per head is the estimated annual consumption of matches in France. The profit upon these was nearly four million dollars.

"THE HUMAN HAIR: Its Restoration and Preservation." A Practical Treatise on Baldness, Grayness, Superficial Hair, &c. 40 pages. Post-free six stamps from Dr. HORN, Hair Specialist, Bournemouth.

THE MYSTERY OF HUBERT THELLUSON.

—10.—

(Continued from page 199.)

Dunster measured the distance from the window—he had jumped it last night, but he was afraid to attempt it now, and he did not know whether it would be safe to venture through the passage in his present weak condition.

"Can you contrive to climb up here?" he said, in answer to Pilchard's question, "and almost before the words were uttered the detective, who was light and active as a boy, had scaled the wall, and swung himself lightly in through the window.

"Not so difficult when you are accustomed to it as I am!" he observed, coolly. "I daresay your lordship is surprised to see me here, but I received news yesterday afternoon which made me take the last down train in order to be at once in communication with you, and at the same time to keep a watch on this house. Perhaps you will tell me all you know about the place?"

Dunster was on the point of doing so when it struck him that he could not mention his suspicions of Theckla's father openly, lest harm should come to the girl herself.

"I think you had better tell me what you know first," he answered evasively, in order to gain time.

Pilchard flashed upon him a quick glance that was rather more piercing than he could have desired at that moment.

"As you will, my lord. Well, then, you will remember that I left one of my comrades in Vienna, on the look-out for information—or rather, for the chance of it, for I did not in the least think it likely he would obtain it. I was wrong, as the event has proved. He kept a sharp look-out on the house I spoke of to you; and one night, as he was passing, noticed a gleam of light in one of the windows. It vanished instantly, and he concluded that a match must have been struck and then blown out immediately. Now, this proved there was someone in the house—possibly a tramp, who, finding it empty, had effected an entrance for the purpose of shelter during the night, or it might be someone connected with the former occupier. My comrade immediately signalled to a soldier who was passing, and told him to watch the front of the house while he himself went to the back, and there let himself in. He was well armed, and therefore not afraid of an encounter, while the reward he knew he should obtain, in case of success, made the risk worth his while. Well, he finally watched the man go downstairs to the cellar, which I told you I had discovered, and there he lifted the trapdoor and let down some steps, which it seems were fastened up underneath the floor. These he descended and remained down for some time, at last returning with a waterproof bag in his hand, which had evidently been hidden there for fear of detection. Of course it behoved my friend to take possession of that bag, and as the man was stooping to put down the trapdoor, he neatly clapped the handcuffs over his wrists, and thus had him at his mercy."

"Well," exclaimed Dunster, in strong excitement, as the detective ceased speaking, "what were the contents of the bag?"

"They consisted of very valuable jewels, and still more valuable documents," returned the detective, with a deliberation that seemed to say he fully appreciated the importance of what he was communicating, and determined to make the most of it. "The documents referred to the plans and movements of a notorious gang of sharpers, the head of which had long managed to evade detection. No one knew who he was or anything about him, except that his coolness and abilities were of a very extraordinary nature. He has manufactured more counterfeit coin, directed more extensive robberies, and eluded detection more cleverly than any man in Europe or America."

"What is his name?" asked Dunster, whose very lips had blanched.

The detective laughed.

"As to his real name it would be quite im-

possible for me to tell you, and no doubt his aliases are without count."

"But the man you caught in Vienna, did he not make a confession?"

"He made a confession! Why he would have cut his tongue out first. He must have been one of the secondary leaders of the gang to have been entrusted with so delicate and confidential a mission as regaining those papers, and when he found he was caught he preserved a complete silence, which he has not yet broken. My idea is that the captain had to leave Vienna in a great hurry, and was afraid of taking the documents with him lest he might be stopped, and the papers discovered. On the person of the man at Vienna they found an address in cipher, which, however, they contrived to read, and that address was to the very house in which we are both standing at this present moment."

It was some few seconds before Dunster recovered sufficient presence of mind to go on with his questions.

"Then," he said at last, "you think the leader of this gang of which you speak is at the Grange now?"

"I have every reason to believe so."

"But if this is the case, are you not giving him chances of escape while you are talking to me!"

Again the detective smiled, and at the same moment drew forth a brace of small revolvers from a case in his pocket, and carefully examined them.

"I brought half-a-dozen men down with me, and they are stationed round the house to stop anyone who may attempt to leave it," he replied, quietly. "Nevertheless, I think it is time my search began, I only thought I would stay to hear anything you might have to tell me with regard to the inmates of the Grange."

"I will defer my communications until a future opportunity," said Dunster hastily.

"Of course that is at your own discretion, my lord," observed the detective, with a slightly offended air. "There is one point I omitted to state, and it is, that in the bag were found a memorandum-book and some other papers which had evidently belonged to your brother, so that the secret of his disappearance is thus bound up with the man of whom we are now in search."

Paler than he was it was impossible for Dunster to become, but clammy drops of perspiration started forth from his forehead, and he caught hold of the back of a chair to prevent himself from falling.

A suspicion, too awful for words, was taking possession of him, and it was strengthened by the remembrance of the promise Theekla had extorted from him the preceding afternoon. Good heavens! Was it only yesterday? It seemed weeks ago instead of hours.

"Are you ready to come now?" asked Pilchard, who had been watching him closely.

"Yes. Lead on," he responded, and mechanically followed the detective as he left the room, and went outside into the passage.

How quiet it seemed, and how cold and wan and grey the dawn was!

The lower rooms were all empty, and after examining them they proceeded to the upper, where, to their extreme astonishment, they found all the doors open.

The first room was empty, so was the second, so were they all, including the apartment Dunster knew to have been Theekla's.

Each chamber bore in it the marks of recent occupation, and signs of having been left in some haste, but there were no papers about—not a sign by which their former occupants could have been traced.

The detective's face began to look blank as he ascended to the upper story, where the same result attended their search.

"They may be down below—there must be a basement;" he muttered, and thither they proceeded, but that, too, was empty, and after he had explored it Pilchard's expression changed from eager expectation to angry disappointment. "Foolish, by heavens!" he muttered, coming to a standstill. Then he turned to Dunster, in a peremptory manner, "My lord, in the interests

of justice, I must demand to know all you can tell me of the man who called himself Marrott."

A moment's thoughts convinced the Viscount that his only course was to obey the mandate. He therefore, as briefly and succinctly as possible, related all that had happened since he asked for shelter from the storm, only omitting to mention Theekla's name.

"And this is all you know?" said Pilchard, looking at him with piercing intentness.

"That is all—stay!" he continued, with a sudden flush of remembrance, as the memory of what he had seen a few nights since recurred to him. As soon as he mentioned it Pilchard started up with renewed hope.

"We must search the moat!" he exclaimed, "and there, perhaps, we may find some further clue. Marrott must have been warned from Vienna of the capture of his confidante, and have lost no time in getting out of possible danger. He is a clever man!" added the detective, not without a certain amount of admiration in his voice.

Once more they went over the house to make quite sure there was no one lingering behind, and then Pilchard went out on the terrace, and gave utterance to a long, low whistle, which had the effect of bringing to his side six men, all in plain clothes, and all as unlike the typical detective as it is possible to imagine.

To them Pilchard gave a few words of explanation, and then cords were procured from the house, and Dunster having indicated the precise spot where, to the best of his belief, the box had been deposited, an instant and careful search commenced.

They presented a strange group, working away in the dim grayness of the early morning, and it was impossible not to be impressed by the sense of mystery that seemed to surround them. The old Grange, with its ivy clad walls and dilapidated chimneys, formed a fitting background for their work.

In spite of himself, and the control he tried his best to exercise over his emotions, Dunster found himself growing excited, especially as, after some difficulty, the object of their search was discovered, and the task of drawing it up commenced.

This was by no means easy, and if the men had not all been exceptionally strong further assistance would have had to be called. The Viscount himself helped, and at length the box—a long, narrow one—was pulled up, and deposited on the bank.

After this had been effected the men paused a few minutes from their labours, while Pilchard looked more thoughtful than he had done before.

"You are a county magistrate, I presume, my lord?" he said, addressing Dunster.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Because I think we had better lose no time in opening this box, but it is a responsibility I should not have cared to undertake without your authority, which I must ask you to give."

"You have it," responded the young Viscount, his voice not quite so steady as usual.

Hammers and chisel were produced, and the lid was forced back, Dunster standing a little way off during the operation, for in this work he was unable to render help.

Then, as the lid fell back, and the contents were disclosed, a simultaneous exclamation of horror fell from the lips of all those near enough to see; and Dunster, trembling with a fear too terrible to put into words, pressed forward, only to recoil with a loud cry of indescribable agony.

The box contained the body of a man, of whom the features were still recognisable, and those features belonged to his missing brother—Hubert Thelluson!

CHAPTER V.

I SUPPOSE every year as it passes by brings with it certain mysteries that are never solved, certain dark deeds whose authors are never discovered, certain sensational paragraphs in the newspapers which are read, commented upon, and in time forgotten.

Such an one was the death of Hubert Thel-

luson; for two years passed away, and at the end of them Ernest Dunster was as completely in the dark as to the details of the crime as he had been when he first looked on the pale features of the dead man.

Of course an inquest had been held, and the result was a verdict to the effect that Thelluson had died from a wound in the chest, which, it was surmised, must have been inflicted by a sword, but of this there was of course no evidence.

Dunster, trying his best to crush out his love for the daughter of his brother's murderer—for in this light he regarded Marrott—redoubled his efforts, and left nothing that could be done undone in his endeavour to trace him.

Moreover, in this he was aided by Government, for there could be no doubt that the man was a thorough-paced scoundrel, who had got into society by some occult method, and then contrived to cheat it by means of a handsome exterior and unlimited money.

However, be that as it may, after his disappearance from the Grange he seemed to vanish as completely as if he had never existed. Detectives were employed, the police in every town in Europe were communicated with, and neither money nor effort was spared to trace him out; but all in vain, and at times went on it seemed more and more improbable that he would ever be found.

Of Dunster's state of mind after that miserable night it is hardly necessary to speak, since with such strong confirmatory evidence it could hardly be doubted that Theekla had known all along of his brother's terrible fate, and had kept her father informed of his own movements with regard to the inquiries he was making, so that he could fly at the least symptom of danger.

And Ernest had loved her so well, believed in her so entirely! Yes, even after her flight, he would sometimes recall the expression in her eyes as she had told him she loved him, and start up, exclaiming—

"I will not believe her false! Sinned against she may be; the daughter of a villain she is; but for all that, pure and innocent herself!"

For many months he clung to the hope that she might send him a line to assure him of her faith, even if she did not let him know where she was; but in course of time this hope died a natural death, and finally the belief in her possible innocence also died—as it could hardly fail to do under such circumstances.

But if that vanished the hope of vengeance did not—nay, it even strengthened, until the desire to stand face to face with his enemy and charge him with the foulest crime a man can commit grew so overwhelming that it dominated every other thought and made life one long, fierce thirst.

Such mercy as Marrott had meted out to Hubert Thelluson should be meted out to him by the dead man's brother, and woe to those who should attempt to stand between them!

Naturally Dunster often wondered in what manner his brother and the Marrots became acquainted, and what had been the motive of the murder; but it seemed probable that no satisfactory answer would ever be returned to either of these queries.

People said it was a pity he did not make up his mind to let the matter rest, and return to his deserted home; but those who knew him best prophesied that he would never do this, while others feared his trouble would grow into a mania, and much brooding over it would turn his brain.

This latter fear seemed by no means improbable, for towards the close of the second year after the discovery of the body, the constant anxiety preyed so much on his mind that his physical health suddenly failed, and he found himself quite unable to continue the search that was now the mission of his life. Doctors all told him he must have rest—that it had become a positive necessity; and so at last he yielded to their persuasions, and went to a little quiet seaside place in Wales, where tourists have not yet penetrated, and the manners and customs are as primitive as if a spell of immutability had

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kept it unchanged during the last two or three centuries.

He took lodgings in a small farmhouse some distance from the village, and spent most of his time in long, lonely rambles across the mountains, where he was not likely to meet anyone save the shepherd, and the only sound to break the silence was the ringing of the sheep-bell or the song of the lark.

In one of these rambles he came across a small but rather pretty cottage, almost hidden amongst the trees on a small plateau of rock. There was nothing particular in it to attract attention, except that it was the only habitation for miles round, and it was due to an accident rather than design that Dunster spoke of it to his landlady, and asked her who lived there.

She was very communicative, and quite willing to give every particular she knew.

A lady and her husband had come there some time ago: the latter was an invalid, and had died soon after his arrival. But the lady stayed on, and turned the cottage into a hospital for sick children.

She was very good (the lady); everybody in the village liked her, and she nursed the children all by herself, and devoted herself to them in a way that astonished their parents, while the children themselves were never tired of singing her praises.

Her name was Liale—Mrs. Liale—but she was quite young, and nobody knew anything else about her.

Dunster asked no more questions, simply because his curiosity was exhausted; but about a week after, he was passing the cottage again, he happened to catch sight of a slim, black-robed figure in the garden.

The glimpse was but momentary, for the lady disappeared in the house almost directly. Nevertheless, he was haunted by some vague sense of familiarity in the outlines—some idea of having seen them before, although he could not recall when or where.

He was puzzled, and perhaps for this reason passed the cottage the next morning, and the next, but was not rewarded by a sight of its inmate.

One evening, however, as he was returning home, and had just got beyond the gate, he came to a full stop; for there before him stood the woman whose face had haunted him—sleeping or waking—for the last two years—the woman he loved, and who had betrayed him!

"Theekla!" he cried out, involuntarily, and at the sound of his voice she stood still, while the yellow sunset lighted up her face and enveloped her in a glory, like the aureole round the head of a pictured saint.

She clasped her two hands together, and just for a moment reeled unsteadily forward, as if the surprise had been too much for her, and she were about to faint. But after all she did nothing of the sort, for one glance into Dunster's eyes seemed to have a strange sort of calming effect on her, and gave her back her self-possession.

"Theekla!" he said again.

"Yes," she replied, "it is I, but I am almost surprised that you should recognise me. Am I not much altered?"

It was true. All the girlishness had vanished from her face, and it was a beautiful, saddened woman, instead of a brilliant society belle, who now gazed at Dunster.

Many times had he rehearsed what he would say to her if ever they met—many times had he formulated sentences of bitter withering satire and angry denunciation; but now that they were really face to face all these faded from his mind, and he was only conscious of the madness of a passion he had not yet mastered—the wild beating of heart that had hungered and thirsted for the more sound of her voice.

He was silent for some minutes, letting her question remain unanswered, then he said—

"Do you live here?"

"Yes."

"Alone?" his voice trembled now.

"Yes," again.

"Where is—your father?"

"Dead!" she returned, simply, casting at

the same time a glance downwards at her black dress.

"Dead!" repeated Dunster, and his first feeling was one of wild rage and angry disappointment. "Then he has escaped me after all!"

She turned upon him her sad, grave eyes.

"Why should you hate him? He did you no wrong—except indeed," she added in a low voice, "the unconscious wrong that every wicked man does good one."

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed. "Surely there is no necessity for you to feign ignorance now! You must be aware that I found my brother's dead body the very night of your flight!"

Her face changed—a shudder shook her frame.

"Will you come inside?" she said, after a slight pause, "and then I will explain to you all it is possible for me to tell. I have been weighing these two things—whether I should respect the wishes of the dead at the expense of suffering you to believe that I am the daughter of a murderer, or whether I should not be fulfilling a higher duty in telling you the truth."

He followed her inside the gate, through a little grove of trees, and then across a lawn into a small sitting-room, very sparsely furnished, but neat and clean, and scented with the fragrance of mimosa and jasmine.

Here he seated himself opposite her as she stood at the window, with the westerly light falling on her face.

How he longed to take her in his arms and hold her to his breast. But there was a gulf between, which, he told himself, could never be bridged over.

"When you found your brother's body you came to the conclusion that he had been murdered by my father?" she began, looking at him steadily while she spoke.

"Yes. What other conclusion was it possible for me to arrive at?"

"I do not know, but you were wrong. My father was a bad man—yes!" she said, with a deep sigh and a tighter compression of her clasped hands. "He was cruel and treacherous, and bent upon nothing but making as much money as he could, and preying on his fellow-creatures. Still there was no blood upon his soul. Do you know anything of his history before you met him?" she asked.

"I know that he went under different aliases, and 'Pullen' was one of them. I know that he was a coiner by profession—a burglar sometimes, perhaps, or at all events, a receiver of stolen goods, and at one time a member of a political society, whose aims were sedition and conspiracy."

She bowed her head, and a burning flush of shame overspread her cheeks.

"You speak bitterly, but the bitterness is deserved," she said, in a low tone. "Still, I knew nothing of this until after I came to the Grange. I was at school in Italy until I was nearly twenty, and then I went to Vienna to live with my father, whom I believed to be a politician, exiled because he was of socialist tendencies. We lived very quietly and never went out, but a good many men used to assemble at our house in the evening, and talk politics—make plans, too, I believe, although I was never admitted into their secrets. Most of the men who came were foreigners, but there were one or two Englishmen, and amongst them your brother. He knew nothing whatever of my father's real character, but simply regarded him as a political agitator—conspirator if you will, and almost entirely agreed with his theories. Some great plan was in progress amongst them, which was to effect a revolution in one of the Eastern States, and regarding which the utmost caution was necessary. Well, one night, your brother came, and by accident he met a man he knew—a man whom he declared to be one of the outcasts of society, and whom he declared was unfit to be the associate of honourable men. He grew very excited, and in an excess of rage this man sprang upon him, and inflicted a deep wound in his side with a dagger which Mr. Thelluson fired a revolver, which it seems he usually carried. The effect of the shot was fatal, and the man fell dead instantaneously."

She paused a moment, shuddering, and closed her eyes.

"I knew nothing of this for a long time after," she resumed. "But the next night we left Vienna in two parties, and came to England, bringing with us Mr. Thelluson, who was disguised in female attire so that he should escape detection. It was he who suggested the old Grange as a place where there would be small risk of discovery, for he said you were away from England, and there were no other near neighbours to spy upon us."

"Why—oh! why did he not communicate with me?" groaned Dunster, upon whom a new light was bursting. "He might have trusted my love."

"Yes, but don't you see it was of that very love he was afraid!" she exclaimed, earnestly. "He could not bear the shame of your knowing he was a murderer, and it was his desire you should believe him dead, and his intention to go to America and begin a new life there directly his wound was well enough to allow him to travel so far. Bad as my father was he had some good qualities, and one of these was his determination never to desert a comrade. Besides, he really liked Mr. Thelluson, and he certainly did all he could to conceal him from justice, although he afterwards took advantage of being at the Grange to resume his old trade of counterfeiting." The girl shivered again, as if at the remembrance of some terrible reminiscence. "Before we had been at the Grange long my father became possessed of a large sum of money, and then he suddenly resolved to go to London for the season, his intention being to marry me to a rich man, and so provide himself with a wealthy daughter in case his various schemes fell to the ground. Do you wonder I can speak in this cold-blooded manner of these things?" she demanded. "Ah! but you must remember I have served a long apprenticeship to a terrible fate, and sometimes it seems to me I have grown callous, and my heart has turned to stone. Well, to cut the matter short, my father managed to get introduced to London society through a nobleman whom he knew, but who was unaware of his real character. Then commenced a wretched time for me. He tried his best to get me to accept the Duke of Restford as a husband; and at last, in order to force me, told me what I had never known before, namely, that his life was a constant defiance of the laws of society and justice, and that, in effect, he was a forger who might at any moment be called upon to answer for his crimes." She covered her face with her hands and drew a long sobbing sigh. Even now the recollection stung her to the quick. "I will pass over that awful time; it finally resulted in our suddenly leaving London, for I absolutely refused to accept the Duke or to go into society again under false pretences, and so we went to the Grange again."

"But," said Dunster, "do you mean to say my brother had been there all this time?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Oh, no! He had a man there to nurse him—one of my father's confidantes."

"And did you know full particulars about him when I met you first?"

"No, I knew his name, but I was kept in the dark concerning all else. Of course I suspected a mystery, and a terrible one. It was for that reason I tried to avoid you when I discovered your relationship," she added, looking down. "On our return we found Mr. Thelluson much worse than he had been; and my father, who was himself a skilful surgeon, declared there was not much hope of his recovery. I helped to nurse him, and implored him to let you know of his condition, but he refused, saying you believed him dead already, and he would not undeceive you."

"But," asked Dunster, "what had become of the body of the man who was killed?"

"I believe it was thrown into a pit in the cellars of the Vienna house," she replied, with a shiver of disgust. "But there was no inquiry made in Austria concerning his death, because he was an American of erratic habits, whose friends were not alarmed at his disappearance. Well,

knowing that your efforts to discover your brother could only result in the knowledge of his guilt I did my best to dissuade you to give them up, and afterwards"—a wave of crimson overspread her cheeks—"the thought of your knowing my connection with the tragedy made me a coward, and I resolved to go away, and leave my father, and never see you again."

"But," he said, gently, "you confessed your love for me!"

"I knew, but the confession was involuntary, for I knew nothing could come of it. It was impossible for you to link your name with mine, so I only waited to finish some pictures I had been painting before setting forth to try and earn my living by the sale of them, and others that I intended painting. Then Mr. Thellison died, and my father told me he intended burying him in the churchyard, at he had desired, but they had not enough men just then to carry the coffin so far, so they put it in the garden, until another man who had gone to Vienna came back. However, he did not come back at all, for he was arrested on going to our former house for the purpose of getting back some papers which had been left there, and which gave important information concerning the movements of the party to which my father belonged. He received a telegram from a friend in Vienna, telling him of what had happened, and of course it behaved him to leave the Grange instantly and seek a fresh asylum. It was on that night you came, and I, learning your presence in the house, was afraid harm might come to you, for it would not have suited my father's plans for you to witness his departure, as he was carrying away a good deal of counterfeit coin with him.

"It was for this reason I sent you the note. Of course I was taken at a disadvantage, for when I declared my intention of not going away with the rest, my father used force. He did not hurt me," she interpolated, with gentle smile, as Duster started up with an angry exclamation, "but he made me accompany him, and I had no chance of escape. We went to London first, and then my father saw the advertisement of this cottage in the *Times*, and determined to take it, as it was quiet and secluded that it was not likely to attract attention. Well, on our way down here he got very wet, and caught a severe cold, which turned to rheumatic fever. I nursed him through it, but he was never the same man afterwards, and at last he succumbed to intense weakness, and died."

Her voice had fallen into a whisper as she uttered the last words, and a few tears splashed on her folded hands.

"And since that time, Theekla!" said the Viscount, interrogatively.

"Since that time I have supported myself by selling my paintings," she continued. "I have been very fortunate in disposing of them, and had made up my mind to stay here all my life. It is quiet, and I am at peace."

"But why did you not write to me?" he asked.

Her lips quivered, but she did not answer.

"I have already heard of your tenderness and devotion to the village children," he added, "and I acknowledge the beauty of the life of self-renunciation you have been leading. But, Theekla, you have other duties—duties that will call you away from here."

He came over to her, and put a hand on each of her shoulders, bending down the while to look into her face.

"I tried hard to forget you," he said. "I told myself you were unworthy, and had deceived me; but through it all I think my heart was true to you. I know that the sight of you brought back all the old love. Come to me, Theekla, and let me take care of you in the future!"

She drew back, holding out her hands with an imploring gesture.

"No, no! How can I—the daughter of a man who is hated and scorned wherever he is known! How can I become the wife of any honourable man?"

"Your father's sin is not yours! Whatever he may have been you at least are sweet and pure. Theekla! such love as mine has bridged

over a deeper gulf than the one that lies between us two! What care I for name or rank! I only know that you are the one woman in the world for me, and none other shall ever become my wife!"

He spoke with passionate fervour, and he could see that her whole frame was shaken with emotion at his words.

"I cannot!" she said, brokenly. "I should be doing you a wrong to marry you!"

"You would be doing me a greater if you kept away from me, Theekla! I am no boy awed by impulse, but a man who knows well the value of every word he utters! And I tell you that it is in your power to give me either happiness or misery! Which shall it be?"

And she, looking in his eyes, and seeing that the power he spoke of was indeed hers, let her heart answer.

"Happiness!" she said, as his arms folded round her in an embrace that was all the sweeter because of the bitter past!

[THE END]

WHAT LIES BEYOND?

—10—

CHAPTER I.

"Mona! Mona!" called a woman's shrill voice, penetrating the clear morning air, until it reached the ear of the girl thus addressed.

She shuddered as she listened. For a few moments she had been in Dreamland. This, as nothing else could, brought her back to the realities of life.

She was standing, when the sound came to her, on top of a high cliff. Below her, the sea lashed the rocks with a dull, hungry roar, almost sprinkling her bare feet with its white foam.

They were pretty feet, too, albeit browned with many a sun, but shaped as one might look to find those rarely put to better uses than to step on velvet carpets and be clothed in silken hose. The instep was high and arched; the foot itself small and slender.

You would glance from it to see the fisher-girl to whom this anomaly belonged. But inch by inch she bore the test. The foot was hers by right, as the dower of a princess. She herself was the anomaly, not this one, small portion of her frame.

"Mona! Mona!" shriller and clearer again rose the tones.

In the door of one of the fishing-huts which composed the little hamlet cradled by the sea, stood the owner of the voice, her face as weather-beaten as the fishing craft to which they owed even their humble livelihood.

"Yes, mother, I am coming!" this time powerfully the girl, turning slowly as she spoke; then, with fleet steps, descending the cliff, until in a few moments she stood by the elder woman's side.

Could it be? Had the word mother passed her lips? Could this close, sacred tie unite these two?

"Has father come?" she asked.

"Come? He's been here ten minutes. Here you've been staring out on the water this hour or more, and never saw his boat sail in under your very eyes. You're daft, lass—you're daft!"

"Ha! Come at last have you, my beauty!" called out a voice from the interior of the hut. "Come in with you, then, and pour out something warm for your old dad. There's somebody else, too, who's waiting to welcome you."

"Mother, who is with father?" questioned the girl, in quick, excited tones, pausing with one foot on the threshold.

"It's Paul Miller, child! Go on in, and don't make your father angry."

For a moment the grey eyes blazed; then the girl stepped within the hut.

Sitting before a low fire, and smoking a short clay-pipe, sat a square-built man who had num-

bered fifty-five years. Under his heavy brows gleamed two small black eyes, which now glanced up with no mean pride at the straight young figure entering with almost a defiant air.

Behind him, standing erect, his gaze, too, fixed upon her, was their guest.

"Sky-gazing, eh, lass!" exclaimed her father, "and Paul and I waiting hungry for our breakfast."

"Good-morning, Paul!" said the girl, nodding her head, but making no motion to extend her hand.

A wave of colour swept over the brown face, and a look of disappointment crept into the blue eyes of the young sailor.

"I would have gone for you, Mons," he half whispered, approaching to where she stood; "but I thought as mayhap you wouldn't like it."

"And for once you'd have thought right," she answered, with a shrug of the beautiful, sloping shoulders, while she moved away, and with deft fingers began preparing the morning meal. "Did you have a good catch this morning father?"

"Good enough, child, for a new ribbon for your bonny brown hair; and as for Paul here, he'll soon be able to buy the ring—eh, Paul?"

An embarrassed pause followed the question, but this time the red flush was reflected on the girl's face as well, and she bit her lips until a drop of blood started to the surface.

To break the silence, Paul ventured on a piece of news.

"Sea View is to be inhabited this summer," he said. "The family has returned from America. There will be great doings, I expect."

A plate fell from the girl's fingers with a crash.

Her father turned with an oath, scowling darkly at her from beneath his heavy eyebrows.

"Your head turned already at the prospect, eh, lass? Well, mark ye what I say! None of it is for such as you. I curse them, I say, and their fine doings with 'em! Harm enough they've done you already, because, forsooth, the little lady could not study alone, and must have a companion, and because the lady-mother saw and took a fancy to you—to Rob Foster's fisher-girl! Ha! that was good. And they almost made as fine a lady of you as the little lass herself, cramming your head with learning, that for such as you is hurtful and can work no good. You'd put flowers on the mantel-shelf near, and my pipe and 'backy' out of sight; but I'll have none of it. To my eyes, my bit of clay is lovelier than a whole gardenful of your pink-and-white beauties—just as to my eyes I like my girl as she is, with no foreign notions in her head. And I won't have it, either! You hear me?" striking the table with his clenched fist. "I won't have it! There's to be no more intercourse between the cottage and the big house on the cliff. You was a child when they went away—only sixteen. Three years have passed since then and made a woman of you. Another year will make a wife—oh, Paul!"

"Mona knows what I would wish. That day can't come too soon for me."

A quick, reproachful glance the grey eyes darted into his face, but her tone was very quiet, as, drawing a chair up to the table she had been preparing, she said:

"Breakfast is served, father."

"Aye!" he answered, failing to with a will, and recovering somewhat of his good humour as he satisfied the inner man.

"So the grand folks are coming back again—back to the house where they say the dead walk. Do they think by feasting and revelry and mirth to drive out these haunting ghosts of the past—these dead-and-buried Raymonds, who will not rest in their graves! It is a haunted house and a haunted race, for all their high-and-mighty airs. Aye, and this year the ghosts will walk! Come, Paul," pushing back his chair, "the fish bite well to day. There's time for another catch."

"I believe I won't go out again," the young man answered.

"Ah, I see! you are baiting your hook for

other fish," with a sly glance at the crimson face of his daughter; "and you're wishing the old man out of the way. Well, I see mother coming. I will go and leave the lovers alone. You're a sly dog, Paul—a sly dog—but I was once young myself. I don't forget that."

A full minute's silence fell between the two thus left alone.

Then the girl turned with sudden passion.

"How dare you," she cried, stamping her bare foot upon the floor, "how dare you come here to torture me! Do you want me to hate you, Paul Miller!"

"Ah, Mona, sometimes I fear you almost hate me now, and you know that I would give my life for your love!"

"Once I used to be glad to come in and find you here," she went on, not regarding his words. "Once I liked you; but now—no—"

A storm of tears checked her further utterance.

"Now my presence is hateful to you!" he continued, taking up the unfinished phrase. "Ah, Mona, I know it, but what am I to do? You've wound yourself round my very heart-strings. There's no hour of the day your face isn't floating before my fancy; there's no minute of the night you don't haunt my dreams! In spite of your scorn I crawl to your feet, as the poor, whipped cur, who knows that a repulse is awaiting him, yet accepts from the hand of his master, with only a dull moan, the blow that, struck by another hand, would make him turn and show his fangs to some purpose. Mona, what am I to do? How can I teach you to love me?"

"By dropping this hated question of our marriage, once and for ever! I tell you it never can and never shall be! You were my friend once. Be my friend still. Tell my father it is your wish to give me up, and so spare me the pain of his wrath. I am no slave-girl, to be sold into marriage! If I were your wife I would kill you—so would I loathe my bonds and long to free myself!"

"Oh, Mona!"

And a very passion of pain was in the young man's voice.

"Forgive me, Paul!" she cried, in quick remorse. "I didn't quite mean that; but if you indeed love me, go away and leave me in peace. Why does my father want me to marry you? There is some reason—some mystery—I cannot understand. Go away, Paul, and leave me to find it out—go for three months! You may come back then. I will be stronger then, or weaker!" she added under her breath.

"One question, Mona, and I will obey you: Is there—and now he drew nearer, and laid his large brown hand on hers, which seemed almost white by contrast—"Is there any other man you love? Is that the reason you want to be rid of me?"

"No, Paul!" she exclaimed, her eyes meeting his honestly and openly. "Who is there for me to want here in this wretched place? It's true what my father said—Mrs. Raymond meant kindly enough when she had me taught with Claire. She thought only of her own child, and doubtless imagined that she served me as well; but what has it done for me? I am like a man shut up in a prison-cell. He was perhaps born there, and knew nothing of the outside world, when suddenly some one enters and kindly thinks to beguile his solitude by telling him of the green trees, the rippling brooks, the great cities, the great world, and he listens as to an enchanted tale, and the walls of his cell grow smaller and smaller, until they stifle him—their white, blank surface becomes a torture to him. The man meant it kindly. No, no, you need not fear! Who would marry me—me—with my head in the clouds, and my feet"—glancing down with curling lip, at the bare brownness—"cut and bruised, and bleeding, by the stones, against which they have no protection. No, Paul, you need not fear. Now, will you go?"

"Yes, Mona. I will do your bidding; but in three months I will return. Three months from to-day you will see me—then, and not until then! Perhaps, Mona, you then may have a welcome for me. Now, I only ask a farewell. I will

make it all right with your father, never fear Good-bye, my girl!"

He bent, with a rough grace, and kissed the hand he held, then turned and went quickly out into the sunlight, she standing motionless.

CHAPTER II.

SEA VIEW was again to be inhabited. Now that Mona was alone, she could realize the news in all its import. The grand old house—so fitly named, since from where it stood, perched on a cliff, the eyes could sweep the horizon from every point—was no longer to stand solitary and alone. Gay voices would ring through its halls, silken trains sweep the marble. The stable stalls would be no longer empty, the flowers no longer left to die unplucked.

But what had she, the fisher-girl, to do with all this! Once the house, in all its stately magnificence, had been to her a second home, and its fair young mistress, unmindful of the vast gulf yawning between them, had called her friend. They had shared each other's studies, each other's plays, each other's secrets; but all was changed now—they had left their childhood far behind.

One had gone out into the world, to return, bringing an element of that gay world with her; the other—ah, she could not soar with the birds: she had remained with the fishes.

But now a sudden impulse seized her once more to impress the old scenes upon her mind.

At any time the family might return, and even were they willing to greet her with a condescending smile of welcome, her father had forbidden that she should accept even so small a boon. Besides, she wanted to be absent when he returned. In spite of Paul Miller's promise that he would make it right with her father, she feared his anger. What excuse could Paul give?

Thus she reasoned, while she quickly performed her morning tasks of setting to order the living-room of the hut, and preparing things in readiness for the next meal; then, snatching up her hat, she was off.

Fall a mile distant Sea View stood, but with a sea breeze blowing full in her face, with her free, unfettered limbs, what mattered distance to her?

At the gate she met the old gardener. She was but a fisher-girl, in his own rank of life, yet he unwittingly touched her hat.

"We are expecting the family home, Miss Mona," he said.

"Yes, I know," she answered. "I came up for the last time to take a look about."

"Go in, go in!" he asserted: "and when you are ready for home, I'll have a bunch of roses for ya. Ah, I don't forget how fond Miss Claire was of you, and they say she's grown very beautiful, and has crowds of suitors at her feet. Aye, and she deserves them, too! Didn't she, before she went away, come and hold out her hand to me, and say, 'God bless you!' to the old man! Ah!"—wiping away a tear with his sleeve—"never a drop of proud blood was there in her body, and I don't believe it's the foreign parts that's brought it there."

Mona smiled her answer in his face, and left him shaking his head and muttering to himself, as she went on up to the house.

Everything here was in readiness—for many guests, she learned, were expected with the family, and they might come now at any hour.

Through the empty rooms she wandered, until she came to Claire's own—a boudoir, dressing-room and chamber, opening one into the other.

They had been newly fitted up, and at their entrance Mona stood transfixed. The walls were lined with mirrors, relieved by flutings of light blue panelling.

The carpet, of creamy whiteness, deadened every footfall in its soft luxuriance. Articles of vertu and bric-a-brac were scattered everywhere.

How lovely it all was, how fitting its fair young possessor!

The girl's eyes sparkled; her breath came in

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short fevered gasps; a crimson spot burned on each cheek. Her very soul was stirred by her innate love of the beautiful, when, as though there could be no Paradise without its serpent, she caught sight of herself reflected in one of the plates of glass.

There she stood, in her short skirts of dark-brown calico, unrelieved by a vestige of colour, her bare feet and ankles in hideous conspicuousness, her hair blown about her temples by the wind, her hat, a coarse, untrimmed straw, suspended from her arm.

This was what she saw. She did not see that the dress, in its narrow scantiness, failed to conceal the exquisite symmetry of the limbs, that the feet and ankles might have been sculptured from stone in their artistic beauty, that her hair had been blown only into picturesque disorder, and that in very truth she looked a princess in disguise standing amid her own.

To all this she was blind, as the scarlet blood mounted to her very temples, and her lips curled as she silently surveyed herself.

"I used to love her," she said to herself. "Have I grown so mean that I must envy her her beauty? What is mine but the roar of the ocean and the fishing-nets? Ah, the mistake lay in ever teaching me the difference—in bringing me here to study and to learn. I learned quickly, too, they said: but was I not far happier in my ignorance? Look at yourself, Mona Foster, and ask what music, and French, and knowledge can do for such as you? Can they change your rags into silk, or cover the naked bareness of your feet? Go back to your hut and your fishing! It is there that you belong."

A dry sob rose in her throat as she tormented herself with her cruel soliloquy; then she turned away, when the sound of horses' hoofs without struck her with astonishment.

What could it mean?

Below, she heard the murmur of many voices. Little ripples of musical laughter broke over the stillness, and now and then a man's deeper bass.

They had returned. She must escape! But how!

She remembered, then, a private stairway, and, with a sigh of relief, hastened towards it; but just as she had gained its head, a gentleman's valet stood before her.

His scornful glance measured her from head to foot. He noted her pallor, her excitement, and drew from her his own conclusions.

"Let me pass!" she said, quickly. "They are coming up stairs."

"She's no business here, and is afraid of being found out," he thought to himself; and, smiling maliciously, he made no movement aside.

"Let me pass, I say!" she repeated. "Oh, they will be here in a moment! I cannot let them see me!"

"Them as is doing right needn't fear to be seen," the man answered, officially; and then it was too late—the gay party were already surrounding her.

Haughtily she threw up her head, and surveyed them with something like defiance.

In the first glance, she had seen that Claire was not among them.

"Who is she?" queried one of the ladies—a petite blonde, whose light blue eyes scanned her with cold, cruel deliberateness.

"I don't know, my lady," responded the valet; "but I caught her trying to escape from one of rooms, and thought as how she couldn't be here for no good."

"What were you doing, my girl? Give an account of yourself," said another of the group, more kindly.

But Mona's innate pride now asserted itself.

"Let me pass!" she said. "No one here has the right to question me."

The little blonde, who had first spoken, paled with anger. To be thus addressed by a beggar—was too shameful!

She turned to a newcomer advancing upon the scene—a tall, handsome man, with easy d'bonair grace of movement.

"Where is Claire, Mr. Ayre?" she queried. "This girl has been discovered in her rooms—probably thieving. At least—"

But she did not have further time for expla-

nation, as Mona, with flashing eyes and flaming cheeks, sprang forward.

"What did you say?" she almost hissed, between her set teeth. "How dare you? how dare you? Repeat that word at your peril! Who are you, that you should ask me my right here? It is equal to yours—ays, and greater!"

Alton Ayre's eyes sparkled as they dwelt upon the group—upon the woman who cowered, and upon the girl who compelled it; but on the latter his gaze rested, fascinated. How superbly beautiful she was!

He remembered, long ago, to have witnessed a stage representation of some such scene, where a queen masquerades in peasant's guise, and, in spite of her outer garb, forces her subjects to recognize her inborn royalty.

"What is the trouble, my child?" he said, kindly.

At the sound of his voice, a little of her stoolism deserted her. The full underlip quivered; otherwise, she gave no sign.

"I wish to leave this house, sir. These people have prevented me."

"She dare not tell her errand here," ventured Miss Mayhew, withdrawing behind Mr. Ayre's broad shoulders as she spoke; "therefore, it can be no good one."

"We have no proof that it is evil," he answered. "I will be her surety. Let her pass."

"She shall not!" asserted the blonde, with increased anger at his defalcation from her standard. "Claire! Claire!" she cried in loud, piercing tones.

"Yes, Kate. What is it? I am coming; but there are so many of the old servants to welcome me, I could not hasten," said a sweet, young voice, as its possessor ran rapidly up the broad stairs. "Why, what is this?" she added, as her eye fell upon the group. Then she recognized its central figure. "Mona!" she cried, with a ring of unmistakable joy in her tone, and brushing past them all, clasped the barefooted fisher-girl in her warm, close embrace.

CHAPTER III.

It was a strange sight. About the bare limbs of one fluttered the brown calico robe; the delicate figure of the other was revealed in a faultlessly-fitting dress of dark-coloured silk, contrasting well with the fair, pure complexion and dark brown eyes, fringed by their golden lashes.

Kate Mayhew took one glance; then, with a gesture of unspeakable disdain, swept away. The valet, recognizing his mistake, had long since slunk off, dismayed and wondering. Alton Ayre, thinking the play to have reached its proper sequel, too, disappeared, leaving the others to follow his example.

In scarce sixty seconds, ere yet her friend had released her from both arms, Mona and the young heiress were alone. The latter drew her into the room from which she had just flown, and there held her at arms' length.

"You are excited, Mona—you are trembling!" she cried. "What has happened?"

In bitter indignation Mona told her story.

"My poor darling!" exclaimed Claire, kissing her again and again. "It is all that wretched Kate Mayhew's fault. I did not want to invite her, but mamma insisted upon it. Never mind, dear! I am determined to have you with me a great deal this summer. I will see to it that you have everything necessary; I have brought you lots of pretty things. You see, Mona, I have not forgotten my childhood promise to be always sisters."

"You are too good, Claire," answered the girl, through a mist of tears; "but we were both ignorant of the world then. Your path lies on the hills, dear, and mine in the valleys. You could not stoop to me, nor I reach up to you. I did not mean to force myself upon you now. You would not have seen me but for this unhappy accident; but I will never forget you for it—never, while I live!"

"Forget me! Of course you will not, for you shall not have the opportunity. Why should we not be friends? Have you not more knowledge

by far in that dear little head of yours than ever by any possibility could be crammed into mine? Do not the birds stop their songs to listen to yours? Did not the old professor tell you that you might have the world at your feet if you chose to put such talent to use? Are you not a thousand times more beautiful than I? No, no, my dear! Sometimes I think you drifted on these shores from some fairy palace. Some of these days the fairy godmother will strike you with her wand, and we shall all bow before you as most loyal subjects."

"No, Claire; no fairy godmother exists for me. Oh, sometimes I wish that I had never seen you—that you had never taught me all that I might be and all that I am. Look at me! Do you wonder that I hate myself?"

"Hush, Mona. You are excited, and I do not wonder. It was cruel, heartless treatment, and they shall answer to me for it. But, child, you might grace any palace in the land. Don't be too proud, Mona. Let me do for you what my love prompts. I have thought of you so often during these three long years, and wondered how and where you would welcome me!"

"I am not proud, Claire. Do not mistake me. Pride is not for such as I; but would you bring me among your friends, who took me for a thief? I owe the woman who dared say that a debt I will pay—ay, though it cost me my life and honour! No, no! I shall always love you—you know that. You know that I would serve you to the death, but our paths divide here. Possibly in the future they may touch, but only for a moment. They never can run side by side; besides, Claire, father has forbidden it. He thinks that it would spoil me, and so it would, I suppose. But it is growing late. I must go or he will be angry."

"You have made your prophecy, and I mine!" replied Claire, gaily. "We will see which is the true one. I have had my own way all my life, Mona; I am not going to relinquish it so easily now."

With these words of happy promise ringing in her ears, Mona turned her face homeward. The sun was setting. Her father would be at home and impatient of delay.

Would Paul Millar have broken to him the news of departure? Her first glance on entering the hut answered the question. He greeted her with a dark scowl!

"Where have you been?" he said, roughly.

"Up to Sea View," she replied.

"As I thought!" he muttered, between his teeth. "Did I not say I would not have you going there?"

"I will not go again, father. I did not know the family had returned."

"Ah, they're back, are they! Curse them, I say! There'll be no more quiet now. But they'll miss a good sailor on their sea excursions, and they'll have you to thank for it. What did you say or do to Paul Millar that he comes to me with a weak excuse, and says he is going on a long cruise? He'd no such intention this morning, when he and I were out in the smack. It's more of the fine-lady sort, I suppose, that you've learned up at the great house. What made him go, I say?"

"Because I asked him, father," the girl replied, with fearless openness.

"You asked him!" he repeated, springing to his feet, and livid with passion. "How dared you oppose your wish to mine! I tell you the day will come when you will crawl to his feet and ask him to marry you, and he will spurn your prayer with a kick! If I had him here this moment I would force you to the priest's, and see you take the vows which would make you an honest wife!"

"I am no slave, father! If you do not want to take care of me, let me go. I can earn my own bread; but I will never marry Paul Millar—ever, to help me heaven!"

She raised aloft her hand, as though registering a vow; but the man opposite brutally

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struck it down, with a curse and an oath, and then relapsed into a sullen silence, her mother meanwhile stolidly looking on.

"You were harsh with her, father," Mrs. Foster ventured, a half-hour later, when the girl had carried her troubles out on the high rocks. "It's the blood in her that tells!"

"It is, eh?" he replied, his fury once more leaping to the surface. "Then, drop by drop, we'll have it out. I tell you I needed Paul Miller's help! I'm at the old work, Martha! It's safe enough, but we need a younger man. As Mona's husband I could have had my own way with him."

"You're at the old work!" echoed the woman, her face paling. "You don't mean—"

"Yes, I do mean just that!" he interrupted. "It may be necessary for you to be on your guard, when you see any of the old hands about—that's all. I know you can hold a close tongue."

"Oh, Rob! don't begin anything! Give it up!"

"Never!" he retorted, "until I swing for it! So the girl's been up to Sea View! Wonder what welcome she got? Dress her in silks and satins, and she'll hold her own with the best of 'em—ah, mother! It's the blood, you said a little while ago. Strange! I don't think you and I would look quite the thing in velvet and broadcloth; yet you're her mother and I'm her father, eh?" he questioned, his face broadening into a repulsive smile.

"Hush, Rob! Don't let's talk of old times. It makes me shudder: and now—I've got 'em again staring me in the face. There's not a night now, as I lie awake, when you're away from me, but I'll fancy you're in the clutches of the law—not a rifle-shot I'll hear of a huntsman on the coast, but that I'll believe that you are the game. I wish you hadn't told me—I wish you hadn't told me!"

"Nonsense, Martha! You're growing childish. I thought you were made of stouter stuff. The Government suspects nothing—never fear. I will scent it when they do; but the Sea View ghosts, which have lain quiet for many a year, will rise and walk again. Mark ye that!"

"What do you mean, Rob? What have your plans to do with Sea View?"

"To do with Sea View?" he hastily repeated, as though half repenting his hasty confidence. "Nothing—nothing at all. I'm only going to try my skill in conjuring up their ghosts by rattling up the dry bones a little in the churchyard. Tsk, mother—don't grow so pale, I'm only joking. But they say, you know, that the old house is haunted, and it's been left so long to the ghosts that they may feel a little jealous of having their privacy intruded upon. Ha! what was that?"

A long, shrill whistle, in imitation of some sea-fowl, broke in upon the outside stillness.

"It's a signal, I suppose, Rob! How long has this been going on? Why have I not been told of it before?"

"Too many questions in a breath, old woman," retorted the man. "Ask one thing at a time, and when I've more time at my disposal."

With these words he went out into the night, walking swiftly towards the shore. A quarter-of-a-mile beyond his dwelling a man joined him.

Neither interchanged a word, but walked on, side by side, until they paused before an immense overhanging rock, whose surface appeared wholly impenetrable.

Close to its base, on the left side, was a space large enough for a man lying perfectly flat, to drag himself under.

Rob Foster threw himself in this position, and his companion followed.

In a few moments, both were able to stand upright, though surrounded by a blackness absolutely oppressive in its density.

By extending their arms they could feel the cold, damp sides of the rock on either side, but no experiments were needed by either.

On and on they walked in the darkness as unerringly as a swallow flies until they must have traversed a long distance.

Then they halted, their further ingress seemingly prevented by another solid wall of rock.

They listened intently. All was still as though they were entombed within a living grave.

Then Rob Foster lifted his arm, and with the stout stick he held in his hand, gave four loud and distinct blows upon the rock, which sent its reverberating echoes back to the very sea. Another pause, another silence. Again he repeated the signal. This time it was answered from within. Then a rough door, cleft in the rock swung outward, and with it a blaze of light caused the two, so long in darkness, to shrink back as though blinded, affording those within ample time to scrutinise who they might be, and if needs be, bar their ingress should they prove foes instead of friends: but now there was a cry of welcome.

Six men were seated in various attitudes in the large chamber, hollowed from the rock. The seat at the head of a rude table had been left vacant, as though waiting the presence of their chief.

Into this place Rob Foster threw himself. Someone poured out a huge flagon of ale, and set it at his elbow. Each man's glass was refilled.

"My men," spoke Rob, lifting his to his lips, and motioning them to follow his example. "I feel, in this moment, the old blood leaping in my veins. Here's success to the brave smugglers of the coast, and death to the traitor that betrays us!"

The next moment the glasses, drained to the last drop, were set down with a ring, and the real business of the night had begun.

(To be continued.)

SOCIETY.

THE Prince of Wales is reported to possess the finest collection of tobacco pipes in the world.

THE Grand Duke Serge and the Grand Duchess Elisabeth are to go to both Darmstadt and Coburg before returning to Moscow.

EX QUEEN NATALEA, of Servia, is said to have the most beautiful teeth of any Royal personage in the world.

THE Queen has a great fancy for powdered cinnamon, a large bowl of which she always keeps beside her on the table.

PRINCE LOUIS OF BATTENBERG will spend the Christmas holidays at Darmstadt, after which the Princess is going to St. Petersburg on a visit to the Emperor and Empress of Russia.

THE Queen gives Christmas presents not only to every member of her own family, but to a large circle of friends and acquaintances as well.

THERE is only one woman admiral in the world, the Queen of Greece. She holds this rank in the Russian Navy, an honorary appointment conferred upon her by the late Czar because her father held the rank of High Admiral.

ARRANGEMENTS have been made for a number of guests to visit the Prince and Princess of Wales at Sandringham during the next three months. The Prince of Wales has, happily, so far recovered the use of his leg that he can move about freely, and he will therefore be able to indulge in outdoor exercise in Norfolk, though he will hardly be able to shoot or ride this winter. The visitors to Sandringham will all be members of the Royal family, the

Empress Frederick, the Duke and Duchess of Connaught, Prince Edward of Saxe-Weimar, the Duke of Cambridge, and Prince and Princess Christian being included. Princess Victoria of Schleswig-Holstein, the Marquises and Marchionesses of Lorne, and the Duke and Duchess of Fife, are also to go to Norfolk, and as the Duke and Duchess of York will be entertaining Prince and Princess Alexander of Teck and Prince Francis, there will be little fear that the Princesses of Wales and the Duchess of York will have time to dwell too persistently on

their respective sorrows.

STATISTICS.

A BRITISH soldier of the line costs the country £55 a year.

FIFTY pounds a year is devoted to dusting the books in the library of the House of Lords.

A CUBIC foot of newly-fallen snow weighs 5½ lb., and has twelve times the bulk of equal weight of water.

THE profit from a single whale that is captured is very large. One about 59 ft. long weighs about 140,000 lbs., and will give 60,000 lbs. of blubber, from which 48,000 lbs. of train-oil can be made, and 3,000 lbs. of whalebone.

GEMS.

OVERCOMING a difficulty changes it into a blessing.

WHAT men want is not talent; it is purpose; in other words, not the power to achieve, but the will to labour.

You cannot stop being educated if you stop going to school. The most you can do is to select your teacher.

ENLARGE your tastes that you may enlarge your hearts as well as your pleasures; feel all that is beautiful, love all that is good.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

A SAVOURY SUPPER DISH.—Cut one pound of calf's liver (be sure it is fresh) into thin slices. Wash and dry it in a clean cloth. Put a layer at the bottom of a pie-dish; sprinkle it with pepper and salt, a few breadcrumbs, some finely-minced parsley and onion, some slices of potatoes, partially boiled, and a couple of rashers of bacon, and continue the layers till all the liver is put in. Let the last layer be one of potatoes. Pour in a little good gravy, and bake the pie for about three-quarters of an hour, and serve quite hot.

DELICIOUS LITTLE ALMOND CAKES.—Put a quarter of a pound of crushed almonds into a basin with four ounces of crushed sugar and a heaped tablespoonful of flour. Add a pinch of salt, one whole egg, and the juice of half a small lemon. Drop spoonfuls of the mixture on to white writing-paper, previously greased with butter, and bake the cakes in a moderately heated oven till they are of a pale golden shade and crisp to the touch. When the cakes are cold they will slip off the paper quite easily.

WHEN a cake is about to be made, all the ingredients should be at hand, in order that there may be no delay in making up the cake. The raisins, peel, currants, &c., should be prepared beforehand, the baking-tin greased in readiness, and the oven be of the proper heat for receiving the cake the moment it is ready. Another important fact to be borne in mind is creaming the butter and beating the eggs, so that air bubbles are created. When once these are brought about, every other ingredient ought to be lightly and quickly stirred in, and without the least delay, till all the requisite ingredients have become sufficiently amalgamated.

Egg SALAD.—One head of lettuce, half a dozen hard-boiled eggs. Cook the eggs forty-five minutes, cool in cold water, remove from the shells, cut into halves, remove the yolks and cut the whites into rings. Arrange the lettuce on a roundplate, lay the white rings on the lettuce and fill each ring with the yolk of egg that has been put through a sieve. Fill the remaining yolk in the centre, and dress all with the following dressing: One level teaspoonful each of salt, mustard, and powdered sugar, one-quarter-of-a-teaspoonful of paprika, two tablespoonsfuls lemon juice, two of vinegar, two eggs, and one and a-half cups of olive oil.

FACETIA.

JONES : "For a while John was out of his mind about that girl." Smith : "And now?" Jones : "Oh, now the girl is out of his mind."

FAMOUS OPTICIAN : "So you can't see clearly the largest letters on the card! Now, my good man, to understand your case you will have to tell me your whole history." Patient : "Well, to begin with, I was born blind."

COAL MERCHANT (anxiously) : "Hold on! That load hasn't been weighed. It looks to me a trifle large for a ton." Driver : "Tain't intended for a ton. It's two tons." Coal Merchant : "Beg pardon. Go ahead."

NED : "If you want to marry an heiress why don't you propose to Miss Elderly? She's rich." Ted : "Yes; but I object to her past." Ned : "Why, I thought that was above reproach." Ted : "It is; but there's so much of it."

FRANCES : "Harry says he just wants to fall down and worship me all the time." Her mamma : "Oh, well, don't mind that, dear. After you're married he won't let it interfere with his business."

THOMPSON : "You look pale and thin, Johnson. Why will you persist in killing yourself working day and night such weather as this?" Johnson : "I am trying to earn money enough to pay the expense of a week's rest in the country."

"We had a lovely whist club," she said, seriously. "We made a rule that any girl who spoke should pay a penny into the treasury for every word she uttered." "Quite ingenious." "Yes; but I don't belong to it now." "Why not?" "Pa says he can't afford it."

"My wife has been studying geology, and the house is so full of stones and rocks I can't find a place to sit down!" "What are you going to do about it?" "I've induced her to take up astronomy." "Is that any better?" "Of course. She can't collect specimens."

MAMMA : "Why is it, Willie, that you never care to play with boys of your own size? You are always either with those that are much smaller or much larger than yourself." Willie : "Cause I can look the littler boys, and it ain't no disgrace to git whipped by bigger ones."

"WHAT are you doing here?" asked Rankin, who had encountered a burglar in his house at 2 A.M. "Pardon me," replied the marauder; "I am in the wrong house." "That's what you are," said Rankin. "There's not a thing here worth stealing."

PATENT MEDICINE MAN : "I don't know whether to publish this testimonial or not." His Partner : "What is it?" Patent Medicine Man (reads) : "Your cough syrup has been used with wonderful success on my boy, aged 10. He confesses that he would rather go to school any time than take your preparation."

"Do you think that young actor has the personal magnetism—the convincing quality—which the successful actor must possess?" "I am sure of it," replied the manager, without a moment's hesitation. "He's the only man who was ever able to get two week's salary from me in advance."

"Don't you feel gloomy!" said the young man who has occasional intervals of soulfulness, "when the sky is overcast with grey, when the rhythmic rain sounds a dirge upon the roof, and the landscape's beauties are hidden by the weeping mist?" "Yes," she answered, with sweet interest. "It's dreadfully annoying. It does make one's hair come out of curl so!"

"WILL, see if you can't be perfectly truthful to-day. Don't tell a lie. Now, promise!" He promised and went away to work. When he came home to dinner she said, "Dear, did you keep your promise?" "I did," he replied, soberly. Then he caught her in his arms. "Darling," he cried, "I will not lie to you. When I said I had kept my promise to you I did not tell the truth, but, believe me, that was the only lie I told all day." For twenty-two seconds she was lost in perplexity. Then she gave it up; the problem was too deep for her.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

VAL.—Not without the tenant's permission.

HAL.—You had better inquire at the theatre.

A. K. G.—She was entitled to only one week's wages.

G. B.—Marriage with a deceased wife's niece is illegal.

IGORANUS.—The President of the United States is Mr. William McKinley.

M. H.—Discharge from the militia can be obtained on payment of £1.

A. B.—Have the letter stamped at once; that will clear you.

ALEXIUS.—Marriages between cousins, whether first or second, are legal.

H. L.—Take them to some respectable dealer and invite him to make an offer.

LAVIE.—Only a lawyer can advise you, after examining the terms of the will.

THE MISSING SHIP.

The ships they come and the ships they go
Far over the shining sea,
But though soft and sweet the south winds blow,
There comes no ship for me.
And though when the harbour bar grows white
The sail comes swiftly in,
To lie where the waves are calm and bright,
Away from the thunderous din,
The bark which carried my hopes and fear
Turns not her prow to the shore;
She has sailed the sea for weary years,
Yet she comes to land no more.

Did the touch at the tales of Might-have-been,
Far out to the rosy west?
And before the storm was she safely in
The Port of Peace and Rest?
I only know I am growing old
With the years that lapse away,
And the hopes I thought always to hold
Have left my heart for aye.
But when I reach the Port of Rest,
And look o'er the sea once more,
I think that the ship that I loved best
Will lie by the shining shore.

G. W.—Consult your bookseller; there are numerous publications of the sort.

WOMAN.—You had better engage legal assistance; it appears a very complicated business.

A. LOWER OF THE "LOWDOW READER".—We think you must have been misinformed. We do not know any way of using gum-arabic for the purpose you mention.

L. N.—The shortest time in which a cablegram has been sent from Liverpool to New York is one minute thirty seconds.

E. R.—The same notice is required by the registrar as for marriage by banns. The fees need not exceed ten shillings.

ONE WHO WANTS TO KNOW.—If judgment has been given against you, and you are able to pay, you must do so, or you may be sent to prison.

REGULAR READER.—If the place was taken by the week it is a weekly tenancy, and a week's notice to quit is sufficient, although for the landlord's convenience the rent may be paid at longer intervals.

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WORTH A GUINEA A BOX!

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For Indigestion
in all its Forms.

Beecham's Pills

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in all its Forms.

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Old and Young.



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For Ensuring a Clear Complexion
Beecham's Pills stand Unrivalled.

Prepared only by THOMAS BEECHAM, St. Helens, Lancashire, and sold by all Druggists and Patent Medicine Dealers everywhere, in Boxes, 1s. 1½d., and 2s. 9d. each.

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THE SALE IS NOW OVER SIX MILLION BOXES YEARLY.

BEECHAM'S TOOTH PASTE

RECOMMENDS ITSELF; it is efficacious, economical, cleanses the teeth, perfumes the breath, removes tartar, and prevents decay. It is composed of the best known ingredients for neutralising the acids of the mouth, preventing all deleterious deposits upon the teeth, and is a pleasant and reliable dentifrice. BEECHAM'S TOOTH PASTE is put up in collapsible tubes, perfectly air-tight, and so adjustable that no waste need occur; the packages are pretty for the toilet table, and most convenient for the travelling bag. Of all Druggists, or from the Proprietor, ONE SHILLING, postage paid.